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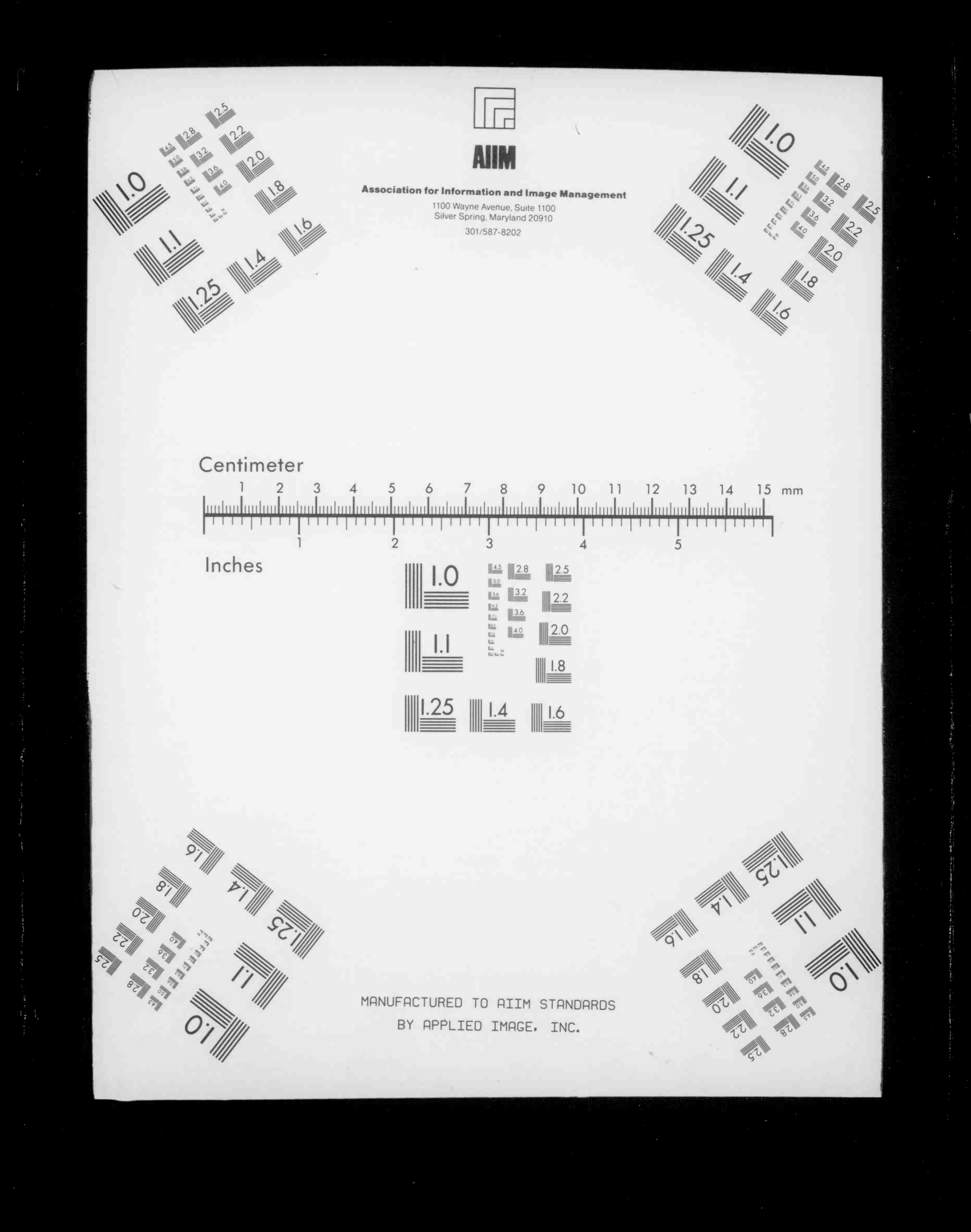
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Life and Myself

Life and Myself

by Giovanni Papini

Translated from the Italian by Dorothy Emmrich

Brentano's · New York

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Life and Myself

1

The Man Who Could Not Be Emperor

MAN of letters, whoever you may be, I should like at this moment to have you here face to face, to look into your eyes and take your hands in mine and to ask you softly: " Do you believe you are living? Living truly, deeply, entirely? Does this present life of yours seem to you as fair and as inspired as you dreamt it in the burning nights of your youth? "

And still more softly, I would ask you: " Did you have a youth? Was there a time when you felt within you, in your blood, something that stirred and trembled, that quickened and boiled, that strove to leap up, to overflow, to deluge the world in a sea of flame? Did you ever, after some hour of excitement, some gorgeous sunset, some inspired verse of poetry, feel yourself, yourself in person, to be the *first man,* the discoverer of life, the discoverer of the world? And did not

this life seem to you a pitiful thing and this world too small? Did you not crave for death for love of life? Did you not feel the vaulting ambition of Alexander when you gazed at the distant sky?" This I should like to ask you, vile reader, wretched faint-heart, you who are reading these pages, who are listening to the heart-beats of another, because you do not know how to act, how to live on your own account. Does it not seem to you vile, more vile, most vile, this thing which you are doing? A chair supports you, before you are the bound pages of this book, on the pages are black signs, with your eyes you skim those signs and your poor little soul laughs or weeps, sees or fails to see, according as those signs forcibly awaken your slumbering imagination. And you believe yourself to be living, I believe, when you read books! When you go out, you will look with contempt on the vulgar masses that are not *up to date*, that do not go in for psychology nor feed on literature. 'I am,' you will say to yourself, 'one of the intellectuals, a man of taste, a thinker, an aristocrat, an altogether superior being, a member in fact of the *élite*. The world turns around me, is made for me. And when it does not go well, I kick the stage-manager and make it over

again. So I lull and amuse myself and in my house you will find nothing but photographs of celebrated works and good editions of well-known writers. A high collar and obscure words are the insignia of my rank: I am king of time, of the spirit, of eternity.'

Do you say all this, vile reader? It is possible: I believe, I imagine, I hope you do. Because it is to you I am speaking and I should like to have you here before me, so that you might feel on your face the warm breath of my contempt. And I despise you, oh reader, for a terrible, a hateful, heart-rending reason: it is that I resemble you, that I am almost like you, that perhaps, oh reader, *I am you*. . . .

Well, I accept your part. I accept it fearlessly, though it is but a sad part, oh drinker of words, you who are reading mine. I am not afraid of my questions. That I may be forced to answer them, I have started to write or rather to cry out these pages. And once more, I ask myself aloud: "Do you believe you are living? Living gloriously, deeply, intensely?"

And I answer: "No, I do not believe I am living. No, I do not believe I am living gloriously, deeply, intensely. Like all the rest, I am vile, a

weakling, a nonentity! There in my room I have made myself a whole painted world; pasteboard men, women of tow, mountains of smoke. I have put all these things in perfect order and on a sunny day they make a fine show. And in my room I have my abiding place. That is my whole world and my whole life and every day I pray to my household gods and spit on those who pass by in the street under my windows, who do not possess at home a little artificial world as graceful as mine."

In there, I am in my kingdom. See my heroic attitudes! One day, I pose magnificently as mighty Jupiter and say to my playthings: "Take care, I am your lord and master, I am your creator and your destroyer and I can at will change your places or break you to pieces, I can for instance put you, oh little horned demon, at the bottom of this chest instead of letting you strut at the top of that stair, and fling you out of the window, oh shameless ballerina, with the perpetual pout on your rosy pulp face."

Another day, I enter into my kingdom with the air of a disillusioned Faust. I close the windows to give a mysterious aspect to the scene, sprinkle everything with grey powder to make

it look more melancholy, seat myself gravely in my armchair, make a wry face, raise my eyes to heaven and end by weeping burning tears on the vanity of wisdom and the delusions of the world.

But it matters little whether I be classic or romantic. I am always a poor child playing in my room and comforting myself by saying: "It is too cold outside and the streets are full of wolves!"

I am — have you guessed it? — an *intellectualist*. Intellectualists are a curious race: they are worth knowing. I will tell you the story of the father of us all, a story so ridiculous that I have never been able to forget it.

One day, a man laced up his sandals, wrapped himself in a cloak and set out from his house, towards the countries of the East, to conquer the world. He was full of great thoughts. His heart was bigger than the whole big world. And he said to himself: "I will conquer a kingdom so vast that my messengers will grow old in carrying my edicts to the ends of it — I will conquer a treasure so great that one day I can fill a lake with gold pieces if I care to. I will love fair white women — all the world over, I will destroy the most terrible enemies with the fire of my glance. To-day, I am but a poor, insignificant man with

a cloak to cover me, but my thoughts are magnificent and I wish to be lord of all creation and master of all living things."

This man entered a city and when he announced that he wished to make himself king and lead men to war to build himself up a great kingdom, everyone laughed him to scorn. Then he vowed to punish that town when he should have become powerful and turned his steps towards another, where the same thing happened to him. And so he went around the whole world and in all the countries they laughed at him and flung him pennies, thinking him a mad beggar.

At last, one day, he found himself in front of his own house once more. Nothing had changed; only his sandals were worn out, his cloak in rags and his hair had turned white. He entered into his house and thought: " No one wanted to follow me; I have not had the strength to put a single army in the field. I have not even conquered a treasure. I shall never, as it seems, be master of the earth." Then he started to meditate on his fate and for some days he was very melancholy.

But one morning — it was March and the first yellow flowers were springing up in the meadows — he woke up joyously and said to himself:

" At last, I have grasped my fate. I was blind when I set out to gain the lordship of the earth. What I believed to be was not the true, the real, the supreme world, but the world of illusions, of the senses, of deception. It is the world of the ploughman and the merchant. The true world I shall find only in my thoughts, in myself, and I can be master of it at my will, since I have but to seek it in myself, my innermost self." And the old man started, with a burning lamp, to seek the true, the deep, the perfect world. And that man — mark you! — was the father of all the poets, of all the metaphysicians, of all the dreamers. He founded the dynasty of those who, without possessing a scrap of the real world, build for themselves daily a hundred little worlds, of air, of white lead, of chalk. And I and you — man of letters — and all our companions are the last-born grandchildren of the man who could not be emperor.

2

The Advice of Hamlet

ONE starless night, whilst I was walking along the river thinking of a strange dream, Prince Hamlet, who for a long time has honoured me with his friendship, joined me and said: " My friend, you are falling grievously ill. No one has as yet allowed himself the pleasure of telling you, but I cannot help doing so. Do not beat your forehead nor grow pale. Though I passed the best years of my life in gloomy Wittenberg, I am no doctor. Yet I can perceive from afar the signs of those terrible diseases of which the greybeards of the profession make no mention. Your disease is of the mind, my friend, and of the mind alone. A long time ago, I too was ill, very ill, and it took a well-sharpened sword and a bitter drink to cure me of everything. Now, for many centuries, I have been in excellent health and perhaps it is for that reason

that it amuses me to look after the health of others. To-night, it is a question of yours. Cure yourself: I repeat to you that you are gravely, terribly, dangerously ill."

Having said this, he was silent and continued to walk at my side. I looked at him — how frail the good Prince Hamlet had grown! — and said to him: " Can you not tell me my disease, oh prince, so that I may seek to cure it? "

Hamlet turned and smiled. Then taking me by the hand — how cold and light was that hand of his! — he led me to a street-lamp. And when we were within its ruddy circle, he stood before me in the full light, gazed into my eyes and said softly: " Look at me: *you are like me.*"

And from that moment, I have never again set eyes on Prince Hamlet.

I have never seen you again, good prince, but times without number, in these warm sensuous evenings steeped in the scent of new-mown hay, I have thought of your last words! And I have thought of the ill in which I resemble you, melancholy prince, and I think I have found it, this fearsome ill, whose name you dared not even mention. Rather than the sword and poison,

it was that which killed you, inscrutable Hamlet, and it is this ill that makes us brothers in those evenings when you come to me and murmur those strange and charming things which neither Horatio nor Polonius ever heard.

And that ill, oh Hamlet, that terrible ill, is it not the disease of *thinking*, is it not *self-introspection?* Are you not the melancholy hero of that family of men who think of what they would and could do instead of what they do? Are you not of those tired and effeminate spirits who prefer words, which are feminine, to acts, which are masculine? And it is not only in my soul, Prince of Denmark, that this disease is hatching its poison. It is not only I who on this earth and in these times am like you! There is a whole tribe of Hamlets, to whom no ghost has as yet appeared, whom no unavenged father awaits, but who, like you, bear in their souls the terrible disease of rasping introspection and a hesitating will. In me and in them, as in you, the pale shadow of thought discolours the rich tissue of life.

But death has healed you. And we, you must know, want to live. We want to live even with our hearts laid bare, even with our feet that fal-

ter. We want to live by forced marches, at full speed — a life that should not be walking, but running, dancing, flying!

I have never seen you again, good prince, and yet it seems to me that you speak to-day in my heart and by my mouth. But I could not swear to it. As you sway between agony and irony, so I cannot say whether my soul speaks in yours or yours in mine. Yet these are without doubt the words I *must* say:

"On, friends, on! Courage! Are your tools keen enough, your instruments sharpened? Do not be afraid of a little blood, do not be afraid if your soul travails a little. No weakness, no fear, my friends. Work, dig, search, down and down, deeper and deeper, to the very depths, the deepest, most secret depths. Leave no fibre covered, leave no vessel intact, no single corner in darkness. Search within, bare every sore, every delicate nerve, every hard bone. Nor even stop at the bones! Within the bones, there is living matter, there is running blood, there is flesh, there is marrow. Have no pity, my friends, none, none, none at all. Tear open your soul and bare it to the sun. Even if it dries up, if it burns, no matter. You must put yourself on show, in pieces, before all men. Be, my friends, the sur-

geons, the butchers, the executioners of your own soul."

Like the hero of Terence, each man torments himself without truce — as God offered himself in one great sacrifice, so each man offers himself as food to the rest. Let all men, in the cities, in the land and far beyond the borders of the land, know if it be possible that in these times, we go to church to flirt with Christ and that we have dreamt of adventures and imaginary journeys around the earth. Let us make known to the world that yesterday we were walking with Apollo, that to-day we are going towards Weimar, that we are old and that we are young, that some time ago we left Nietzsche by the wayside and that to-morrow perhaps we shall abandon even the master-poet. Let us in fact be the public criers and chroniclers of ourselves! Is not that perhaps the mark of our superiority? Is it not perhaps the halo of our greatness?

Let us then accept the charge, not tire in making our accounts again and again. Every day, let us think of the balance of our spirit, every hour let us feel our pulse, every tenth day let us publish the bulletin of our health and our sickness!

And above all, let us make plans, my friends. Let us make many, great, continual plans. Is

not a plan the tea, coffee, opium, hashish of life? Is it not the substitute, the proxy, the pledge of reality? Dearest and most gracious of Gods, how I have loved you and rocked you and caressed you in the secret places of my soul! Who will ever sing your praises, who will ever publish an apology for you, with a preface, notes and appendix? Who will ever love you as I have loved you?

Two joys, oh divine one, you extend to man. That of having a pretext for doing nothing in the expectation of coming to a decision and that of persuading himself to enjoy at the present what he meditates for the future. You are then, oh plan, the double and blessed path of rest, the double staircase rising to perfect idleness.

Let us then make plans, my friends! Let our lives be made up of plans and designs. May death find in us nothing but promises, let life be for us but the anticipation of eternity. But what am I saying? All I am exhorting you to do, you do, you have done already. Indeed — confess it — you have done nothing else. Are we not at the present time men who consume an enormous amount of imagination, and are we not the chaste betrothed of life and glory?

We feel the roar of life around us like a great

sea amid the song of the sirens and the noise of the slaughter. But we are still here on the bank, with our feet in the yielding sand, nor have we yet crossed the first billows. And indeed we are not even all on the bank. Many of us are still shut up in our houses, in our old houses, between the hearth of our fathers and the mystic cell. And I see them, these big children, with great maps in front of them and with their fingers they are tracing out the ways and with their eyes they are following the boundaries. And at the head of each map is written: *The World*.

Every evening, when the stars grow more pensive, when men return from their work and have time to think what they have done and what they will do, when through the streets are heard the songs and sounds of those who cannot forget, we sit down in front of our maps and with tearful eyes and trembling hand trace out the course of our life.

The terrible anxiety of those hours of search! The terrible fear of abysses and swamps! Everything is marked on these maps with light and many-coloured signs. There on one side is the Land of Tenderness, coloured blue and rose, with well-kept woods and silver streamlets

where the golden fishes dart. But there too is the Land of Terror, dark of forest, mottled with blood, shaggy with mountains, with neither streams nor lakes, dry and pitiless as the heart of him who dies of anger. And next to it, strange to say, is the Land of Dreams, veiled in fantastic mists, alive with fleet-footed lynxes, full of phantasmagoria, with deserts that come to life beneath the breath of the Morgana, with precipices that miraculously give birth to bridges beneath the pilgrims' feet. And further on is the Land of the Merchants with its fat earth and overflowing barns; the Land of God with the huts of its hermits and the harmonies of its churches; the Land of Words full of raucous cries and fetid breath.

All these countries and many others we see on the map of the world, in the evening by the familiar light of the lamp, and we see the roads that lead to treasure and ecstasy; those that lead us to the baby's crib or those that throw us into the limitless ocean, those that lead to madness or to power, the ditch or the throne. We see and follow them all, tracing them on the map with feverish fingers. And the hours pass by gravely and sadly, men pass by clamouring, women laughing, and still we follow the turn-

ings of the roads and discover the short cuts, we guess the paths and point out to our waiting body a perfect retreat or the conquest of the earth. In the meantime, time passes with its tacit cruelty. We hear it stamping softly outside our door like an army of barefooted demons. Every day is a demon, every hour a demon, every minute a demon, oh friend. Does no one realize it, does no one cry it aloud? Should I then remind you with terror that every day, every hour, every minute, makes us less young, less strong, less eternal? Should I make you tremble, thinking of the death of time, the death of life, the death that knows no redeemer, no resurrection? Must I tell you once more, fearfully and passionately, that we live but for a brief span, that we have but a breath of air, that we have but few lips to kiss, few moments in which to create?

Do you never think of all this? Do you never realize this unceasing pursuit of a relentless fate? And whilst your soul is dawdling, whilst you hang out your rags, whilst you mark out your itineraries, does anger, contempt, disgust for yourself never overcome you? Does a violent impulse never make you rush from your operating theatre and your maps and do you never feel

a savage desire to hide your entrails and tear up your painted maps of the world?

Well, then do it for once, my friends! Say: "Are we here to make a spectacle of ourselves? What divine impresario has engaged us? Are we at a fair that from our mouths we must throw up gilded fripperies like a rogueing juggler? Must we consume our life crumb by crumb, drop by drop, saying what we were going to do instead of doing, sketching the journeys we shall never undertake, working out on the map the triumphs we shall never gain, marking the highroads that shall never know the trace of our footsteps?"

A little effort, my friends. Let us throw our maps into the raging, foaming sea that attracts us so deeply. The sea is a wise god who knows how to keep his secrets. He will not fling up the corpses of our plans on the beach. One day, we shall finish telling in fair words what we are and what we seek to be; we shall cease to propose in heroic accents nocturnal flights and explorations — and we shall walk. For the last time let words be valets that walk before no king.

Whether you turn to the south or to the north! Classic or romantic: it matters little!

For Christ or Satan: as you wish! Lyric or dialectic, lords of words or captains of deeds: what we want, what we can, what we know. But, in God's name, do something; let us give to ourselves, to our companions, to our enemies, our work, the proof of our conquering and creative power. Let every man finish his task, be it great or small, let every man gather in his harvest, be it humble oats or fair wheat!

The ship lies in harbour near to the shore, coated with tar, all her sails set to the wind, all her flags flying. The captain at the prow is scanning the horizon; the boatswain is bending over the ocean maps to trace out the future course. But the ship lies by the shore, it is still moored, it makes no movement, it does not weigh anchor.

At the gates of the city, the rider has leapt on his horse. The horse is caparisoned, the rider has his well-strung bow in his hand, his dark sword by his side. But the horse moves no limb, the horseman shoots no arrows, the sword does not leave its scabbard.

You, oh man, stand on the threshold of life and your cold blue eyes can be seen scanning the horizon, your heart, that is equally fierce to love and to hate, can be heard beating and your

breath comes panting like that of a wild animal that would dash itself on the ground.

But after the hour of waiting comes the hour of impatience. The ship rises and falls and seems to shake itself and strain at the moorings that hold it to the land — the horse stamps and chafes and stretches out its head towards the fragrant meadows, the rolling fields. . . .

3

The Prisoner's Prophecy

FROM a dark prison of flesh, we come into the world, my friend and brother. And no sooner are we free from it than we would build a new prison for ourselves; a prison more terrible than the first, a prison of the spirit. When we are children, we grow, working with impatient hands to raise the walls higher; every day we heap up the stones, every tear serves to cement them, every sorrow makes us more lonely, every discovery more distant. With dreaming eyes we shut ourselves up within ourselves, as if in a well-beloved house.

And when we reach adolescence, our prison (our fortress) is completed and only some mother or adoring mistress may seek to penetrate through a rift in our eyes into its gloomy depths. Then begins our heart-breaking vigil. The soul would spread its wings, but the space

grows narrower and narrower. Lean over one of these souls and you will hear far down its vain, furious beating. The eye grows more used to the light, but the light grows dimmer. The voice seeks its first harmonies and the people around are no longer listening, they no longer understand. The tears roll down and no one notices them; paroxysms of rage burst forth and no one is alarmed. The circle grows narrower and narrower, the loop-holes close up, the fortress sinks and seems to change into a cave. Then indeed in that fortress and prison, we are tortured and put to the rack. No window, no door, no sky that is not of your dreams, no light but what comes from behind your closed eyelids. You are shut up like an atom, secret as a cell, silent as a night-preying cat that no longer trusts to the intelligence of man. And in the darkness and the silence, a voice speaks to you: "No one will say that which you wanted to say. No one will know that which you have known. You will have no friend who would die for you. And the voice of cowardice shall goad you to new baseness and you will tremble behind your walls, and you would wish to make a fine sally and run into the arms of your enemies. Then you will deck and adorn yourself; like a torch, you will hold aloft

your finest flag, you will put on your gayest garments, your most waving plumes, your most delicate embroideries, your richest arms. And you would go forth into the sunshine, to the earth, to the light, to liberty. You will be consumed with Messianic fire, in your breast will rise the prophetic spirit of Ezekiel and Joachim. You will yearn to speak to your equals and like a light o' love you will entice them with smiles and caresses. And for the whole of humanity you will feel a great secret love, a mad sense of maternal tenderness, a passion which becomes more desperate as you try to calm it. Then the mask of Christianity will model itself on your face, of its own accord, like soft wax, without your making or seeking it. You would wish to reveal truth, goodness, greatness, wealth. The words will rise as a lump to your throat, will flow from your mouth in a tireless stream, you will find the gentleness that makes men turn faint and the invective that makes them tremble. Your hands will be raised in the air like trunks that promise shade in spite of their bareness, your hair will stand on end in your earnestness, your body grow tall as if it wished to rule on the mountains and stretch itself on the cross.

To your bedside at night will come the

priestly shadows of the ancient seers; you will see Moses, still dazzled by the burning bush that gave forth the terrible laws; you will see Christ weeping tears of weakness beneath the drooping olive trees; you will see Mahomet riding through the desert with a fierce hope in his heart. And all of them will seem to you as brothers, and you would, like they, inflame a people, intoxicate a nation with dreams, revolutionize a world.

Your feet will seek the mountains and your voice will search out the multitudes and you would wish to be alone and the creator of all. It will seem to you that with you begin new times and new laws, and smiling you will look at the images of the old gods and will be tempted to break the old tables of the law in the sanctuaries with your own hands.

All this you will feel when your soul is full, when the cave where you grew will appear too narrow for you, when it will seem to you that from your solitary darkness light must burst forth. Then you will feel god-like and say that you are the son of God, if it does not come into your mind to kill him.

So you will come into the world, riding on horseback, chanting, bedecked with jewels and

caparisoned, proud as a king, lavish as a sultana, laughing as a court fool.

Above all as a fool, oh my friend and brother. And above all as a court fool. Your sally will be your undoing. You will give to others so much light that you will be the first to be dazzled. And you will be more lonely, more lonely still, because you will know that beyond the fortress, *there is no one,* whilst you hoped and yearned for a multitude, my friend and brother. And one day, after you have shaken all your bells, after you have flung out all your words, after you have made all your garments to shine under the sun, after you have waved all your flags and blown all your horns, you will be left alone, forsaken, woeful as a charlatan whom the crowd suddenly deserts on the market-place. Then will come the day of sorrow, the day of your great, deep, silent sorrow, my friend and brother, the day when you *discover the desert!*

Then you will take off your festive garments and every word will seem to you a small, empty, ridiculous sound, an old shell, a filthy husk, a useless toy. And your flags will fall in the mud and your horns will be mute to every breath and only the old trees, rocking beneath the wrath of

the wind, will seem to shake their heads in pity. You will be left bare as a beggar, homeless as a wanderer on the steppes, desperate as a man condemned to eternal life. You will have given everything and everything you will have lost. The sun will no longer warm you, water no longer quench your thirst, your breath will seem to flee your breast. Then you will remember the tragic disappearance of the fathers: of Moses, of whom it was said he was called by God and who disappeared from human ken and went out into the solitude of the desert to weep on the vanity of his work — of Christ, who on that terrible night wept not for his neighbour, the martyr, but for the discovery of the uselessness of his mission. . . .

And you too will know that you wanted to give what you did not possess: truth — that you wanted to give to those who had not vessels to gather up your gifts — to speak to those who did not understand — not to understand yourself what you wanted to say.

The last day will have come. Your soul will be like a devastated city, like a ruined tower. And still you will wish to dig through the bed of ashes to find in the heart of the world some hidden flame. But all will have gone out, all will be

cold, no flame will flicker amidst the ruins, no hearth will beckon to the pilgrim from afar. Everything will be dead, for you will be dead. Nor will you even have the strength left to dig yourself a fine tomb!

Then, my friend and brother, there is only one thing left for you: your old cave, your mysterious haunt, your secret fortress that you left in the day of your fullness. You still remember the high black walls, the subterranean labyrinths, the tempting darkness. Go back, oh dying beggar, to the den of your childhood! Have the strength to wall yourself up once more in your hermitage, locked with seven keys, sealed with seven seals. Be your own prisoner and your own jailer. Know, like the birds of the mountains, how to die alone amongst the rocks.

And turn your back on, leave outside your door, those enigmatic spectres that you called *the others*. If you want to be *yourself,* do not name them your *equals*. To be like them, you must be another, you must be untrue to yourself, you must cast nets, you must don strange cowls, cover yourself with filthy cloaks. And think — a terrible thing! — that perhaps each man will do that which you are forced to do and will abase

himself to know the fallen, will hide himself to find those who are hidden, will go masked to recognize those who are masked! Then do not chide your folly, do not hate your words, do not curse your undertaking. There is still time to die well. You will re-enter your fortress naked, but how much stronger will be your nakedness than your ancient wealth! You will have flung out that which weighed on you most, all your *appearances,* all your lying hopes. That which bound you and consumed you, you no longer have; you lost it on the thorns of the hedges you crushed down and in the muddy waters of the rivers you crossed.

At that time, you wanted to *say* and now you know that no one can *say* but only *sing;* at first, you wanted to enter into the soul of others and now you know that every soul is alone, inaccessible, impervious, as your own soul, my friend and brother. And if you wished to rule, you know that nothing can become yours because *everything is yours.*

Now, the cave to which you have returned from your noisy exile will no longer seem to you dark and narrow. Every day it will grow larger and wider, as if some giant in a rage were striving to break down the walls. And your eye will

no longer see the biblical distinction between light and darkness. You will no longer understand what from childhood they told you of night and day. You will have passed the limits of scholastic antitheses. And little by little, the cave will dissolve like a crown of mist, like a magic wall, and a world you neither know nor realize, that you will not know but will live, shall be your royal dower. And one day, in this world of silent life, a great dazzling voluptuous serpent will show you its open mouth, so that you may see its tongue, cut off. The old weakness and the old cowardice will be overcome. Eve will die, no longer tempted by insidious words, no longer fed on the moral apples of the miserly Jewish gardener.

And you will chant *no* hymn to celebrate this victory.

4

And the Devil Said to Me . . .

1

IN all my life, I have only spoken to the Devil five times and yet I am certain that, of all the people now living, I am most familiar with him and know him most intimately. He treats me — and I state it with a certain pride that I do not even try to conceal — with a benign condescension, which has more than once succeeded in touching me. When I am with him, I can do nothing but listen. Or rather, that is a mistake: I listen and gaze at him. The Devil, at least as he has appeared to me so far, is an unusual figure. He is tall and very pale: still young but with that youth which has lived too deeply and which is sadder than old age. His long, dead-white face has nothing extraordinary about it except the tightly closed, thin-lipped mouth and one single

deep furrow, that rises perpendicularly between his eyebrows and loses itself at the roots of his hair. I have never been able to discover the colour of his eyes, because I have never succeeded in looking at them for more than a moment, nor do I know the colour of his hair, because a silk cap, which he never takes off, hides it completely. He dresses soberly in black and his hands are always faultlessly gloved.

It is a little difficult for him in these days to decide to come to earth. One day he confessed to me with an air of sadness: " Men no longer interest me. They are to be bought for so little, but they are worth even less. They have neither marrow, soul nor the breath of life: perhaps they would not even have enough red blood to sign their own damnation."

Notwithstanding this, on certain days, when he is bored in his own overcrowded country, he comes up to us. No one, to tell the truth, is aware of it, for men no longer recognize him and pass him by, believing him to be one of themselves, even smiling at him and raising their hats, with an air of security that makes one tremble for them. But I am always conscious of the *trace* of his passing and seek to enjoy his company. The Devil's conversation is the most profitable

and agreeable I know; he is of those who interpret the world and above all the world within ourselves, far more clearly than any of the short or long treatises on philosophy that you may read in the University Library of Heidelberg.

Never have I found a more indulgent being than the Devil. He is so perfectly acquainted with all the villainy, baseness, filth and bestiality of mankind that nothing surprises him, nothing arouses his indignation. He is as tranquil and smiling as an ancient sage and sometimes he seems to me to be more Christian than all the Christians in the world. He has pardoned even *Him* who condemned him and drove him away. When he speaks of it, he acknowledges that the Almighty acted justly in flinging him headlong from Paradise, since a king cannot permit himself to be surrounded by over-proud and indisciplined beings. " Had I been in his place," he confessed to me once, " I should have condemned the rebel to a more terrible punishment. I should have bound him to inaction, to immobility. God, on the other hand, was generously clement towards me and gave me the means of following the career for which I was best adapted. And although to-day I am rather tired of it, I have

really no reason to complain; I should have been much more bored in the bosom of divine beatitude."

Towards men too, he is animated by a slightly ironical kindliness, not devoid, it must be confessed, of a deep-rooted contempt, which he does not always succeed in dissembling. He is, from his very office, the tormentor of mankind, but long habit has made him less malevolent and less terrible. He is no longer the hairy, monstrous devil of the Middle Ages, the tailed and horned devil who roused passion in the breasts of nuns and inflamed the solitude of desert hermits with lust.

He has come to realize that temptation is perfectly useless. Men sin of their own accord, naturally and spontaneously, without any incitement or provocation. He leaves them in peace and they come running to him as water runs down the hill. For this reason, he no longer considers them as enemies to be overcome, but rather as good and faithful subjects, disposed to pay their tribute without undue pressure. So that, in recent times, he has conceived for us men, a certain pity, that does not destroy his contempt, but that tempers and veils it. This opinion was strengthened by the last conversa-

tion I had with him, in which he revealed something to me which has a certain value for all of us who are seeking the *above and beyond.*

2

I met him for the last time in one of those lonely streets around Florence, closed in on either hand by high walls and shadowed by the overhanging branches of olive trees. He was strolling along reading a little book bound in black and laughing to himself as only he knows how to laugh. I went up to him and he had no sooner seen me than he closed the book, took my arm and started to talk:

" I have known this little book for centuries: it is the Bible, I reread it from time to time when I want to recover my good humour. The one I am reading just now is in English and I find that English lends itself admirably to the Old Testament, whilst I prefer Italian for the New. Just now, I was rereading for the thousandth time the first chapters of Genesis and you will understand why. As you know, I play an important part in them and occasionally, in addition to being proud, I confess to a little vanity. To tell the truth, it gives me pleasure to see myself

in the guise of the serpent, coiled around the tree as in the old engravings, stretching out my mottled black head towards the soft naked body of Eve. It is really a sin that the story of the temptation should in the course of time have suffered such changes at the hands of God's historians. One of these days, if I have time, I shall certainly make a correct version of the Bible, and not only a correct but an enlarged one, since saints and pious chroniclers have shuddered to mention my name too often and have let some of my best undertakings sink into obscurity.

" To return to the temptation, I repeat, my dear friend, that the biblical account has been brazenly falsified. I have never told this to anyone, but I think you are the man to whom I can say what no man could invent of his own accord. I must confess to you then that in the true sense of the word, I was neither a tempter nor a deceiver. When I induced Eve to taste the forbidden fruit, I had no intention of bringing misfortune on mankind. My sole purpose was to revenge myself on the Almighty, who, as I thought at that time, had treated me shamefully. I wished to create rivals to his power, so that it was by no means untrue when I said to

Eve: ' Eat of this fruit and you *shall be like unto God.*'

" I was, I assure you, telling the pure and unvarnished truth, for the forbidden tree was the tree of the knowledge and of the science, not only of good and evil as the Jews say, but of truth and falsehood, of the visible and invisible, of heaven and earth, of animals and spirits. And you know, my dear friend, that *wisdom is power* and that to be God means neither more nor less than to be wise and powerful. So that I had no intention of deceiving mankind when I pointed out to them the way of becoming equal to God. It was to my interest that they should succeed, since by their help I hoped to reconquer Heaven.

" I can see from your eyes that you want to ask me something and I know what it is. How did it happen that Adam and Eve, although they tasted the forbidden fruit, did not become Gods themselves, but instead were flung by their God out of the Garden of Eden?

" I will explain this apparent mystery in a few words. In the confusion of the moment, Eve did not notice that the fruits of the tree were many and varied, nor did she hear what I told her, that it was of no use to eat only a few of them, but

that she *must completely strip the tree* — that is to say, acquire all wisdom.

" Instead of which, as soon as she had eaten one, she lacked the presence of mind to gather and eat the others and so it happened that God had time to perceive the danger and avert it instantly by perpetual banishment. If Adam and Eve had eaten all the fruits of the wonderful tree, the Old Man would no longer have had the power to drive them from Paradise. They would have been Gods against God and no angel, however armed with flaming swords, could have put them to flight. God *was able to punish them because they had not sinned completely*. The original sin was chastised because it was not great enough. So it always happens on earth and I need scarcely remind you again of the conversation between Alexander and the pirate to show you how a crime is punished if it be small and exalted and crowned if it be great.

" Man then, on that distant day, lost a magnificent chance of becoming God, and I one of the few chances of returning to Heaven. But I believe, my good friend, and tell you, even though you men do not pay much attention to the advice of the devil, I believe you *would still be in time to finish the fruits of the tree,* you would

still be in time to become Gods. You no longer remember the way to the Garden of Eden, but I know that some seed of the tree has flown beyond it and has taken root. It is a question of seeking it in your forests, nursing and pruning it, until it once more bears fruit. And then — believe your old friend, whom certain envious servants of the Almighty would make out to be your enemy — then you can eat of it at your ease, even until you are satiated, and my promise will be fulfilled.

" Do you wish to ask me some indication, some sign by which you may recognize the tree and its fruits? I can tell you nothing. You must trace it by yourselves, with patience and perseverance. And let me know directly you have found it, for then my mission will be finished and perhaps the good God will call me to himself once more."

The devil's voice, at this point, became a little melancholy. The deep straight furrow, which cuts the middle of his forehead, seemed to me to grow deeper. After having paused a moment, as if seized by some thought, he continued on his way in silence, gazing at the stars which were starting to twinkle in the languid evening sky.

5

The Temptation of the Devil

LAST night, I dreamt a strange undertaking, this morning I carried it out and to-night I am writing it down. Let all those, who are wise enough to believe in the reality of the things that do not happen, listen to me.

I often meet the Devil in my dreams and last night too I saw him. I dreamt of him and at the same time I dreamt of a temptation; but it was not he, mark you, who tempted me — *it was I who tempted the Devil.* The dream was so unexpected and so strange that I woke up with a start and for the rest of the night, I could not turn my thoughts from the scene that had flashed across my sight and from the words I had heard for an instant.

This morning, I decided there was no other way of getting rid of this strange nocturnal vision than by making it real, so without further reflection, I set out.

At the end of the street, in which my house lies, the Devil was waiting for me. For a moment, I thought he knew of my dream and that he himself had provoked it, in order to fool me. Somewhat abashed, I was on the point of turning back, when I remembered that several days ago we had arranged to meet at that spot, so that we might go together to see an old cypress tree, that had more than once sheltered our colloquies beneath its massy black shadow.

We set out in silence, without even a greeting. When we reached the outskirts of the town, the Devil was still silent, but my dream came back to me more vividly and compellingly than ever and my lips started to move.

But no words came. How could I start to talk in the face of that obstinate silence?

At last, we reached the old cypress tree, which was shaking its hoary crown with an air of impatience and reproach. We sat down, leaning back against its broad solid trunk, and still the Devil was silent. Then, as if some spring had suddenly been set free within me, I felt the words I must say gush forth, rise to my lips and overflow. And in this way, I spoke to the Devil:

" Master and friend, for you the day of temptation has come. You can no longer tempt men,

so men must come to tempt you. You succeeded with Adam, with Christ you failed, but you are neither man nor God, whilst I am a man who may become like unto God. Therefore, I have the right to lead you into temptation and so revenge Adam and his sons.

" To the first man, you offered divinity; to Christ, the kingdoms of the earth; to Faust, power. But I offer you something better than these; I offer you, not to ape God, not to possess that which exists, but to become the real opponent of God, the actual destroyer of the human race.

" They say you are the great enemy of God, the great denier and seducer of all things, but it is in no way true. You have sought to imitate God with miracles, you have sought to rule like he, you have copied and followed him as a good beldam follows her master. If you had truly been the antithesis, the counterpart of God, you should at all times have done the opposite of that which he did — you would have ceased to merely raise anti-popes and anti-christs — you would yourself have become the true *Anti-God*. Which has been God's great work? The creation of the world. Which should have been your great work? The destruction of the world. You should

not — do you understand? — disorganize and complicate the world, but destroy it, suppress it, annihilate it.

" However, craven boaster, have you tolerated that the world should continue to exist? How is it, cosmic revolutionary, that you have not known how to put an end to the universe? When will you succeed in answering God's *Fiat* after centuries with one great overwhelming *Pereat?*

" So long as you are content to annoy the Lord in the usual petty way, so long as you contend with him for some pusillanimous soul, so long as you throw some part of heaven and earth into confusion, you will be unfaithful to your mission, which is to be the opponent of God. In the name of certain men, who are weary of these fictitious battles, I give you notice to fulfil it or to disappear forever.

" I will tell you, once and for all, how you could bring this world to its end. You must change your plan of action completely. Up to the present, you have been a seducer and a disorganizer, an active many-sided spirit, that is to say a creator of movement and change. All this is perfectly stupid. You know that movement is the change in time, that change is the creation of diversity, and that reality is the convergence

of diverse elements. Reality is great in proportion to its diversity. To increase this diversity, that is to move and to change, is to intensify reality — to lessen the diversity, that is to immobilize and equalize, is to lessen reality.

" Men have tried to kill this reality with words, which serve to classify rather than relate to each individual thing — that is, in a certain group of things, they have considered only that which renders them alike. A number of men, whom the common masses call philosophers, that is to say lovers of wisdom, have gone further than the rest and have tried to reduce the whole world with its infinite variety of movements and forms to a single word. After which they have chanted hymns of praise to themselves and imagined they had set the word *finis* to the book of the universe. But these men have not realized that that word, just because it was to include all things, that is to deny all diversity, no longer contained any reality. In the world of ideas, a unit is called inconceivable — in the world of things, a unit is called non-existent. You should realize that which the philosophers have only dreamt of — you should, that is to say, be the philosopher operating in things and not in words. The philosopher would reduce the

world to a single word and ends by losing all sense of logic. You should reduce the world to a single thing and so you would obtain the true, the real, the ultimate and definite nothing.

" I have pointed out the way to you. Now it is for you, who are still powerful, to follow it. Fuse, assimilate, unite, bind, level, equalize, suppress diversity, reduce all the animals to a single one and that animal to a plant, and all the plants to this plant and this plant to a mineral and all the minerals to this mineral and all the bodies to a sole body, all the substances to a sole substance, all manifestations of strength to a sole manifestation, and that sole manifestation to the sole element of the substance and then you will see that little by little the world will grow pale and attenuated, will vanish in your hands and you yourself and God himself will be a single thing and that single thing will be part of the whole and will disappear with it.

" Hate diversity, trample on distinction, arrest movement, hinder change and then indeed you will be the enemy of God, the canceller of his works, the essential adjurer of his divinity. Let your activity be directed not to stirring up, but to suppressing every form of activity. Encourage idleness, provoke ecstasy, help the fab-

ricators of general ideas. Little by little, the world too will become idle as an ascetic and colourless as an idea.

"So you will at last have replied to the *Genesis* and if any man could still write, he should say that at the end there was neither earth nor heaven nor even the abyss. God would see the work, with which he was so satisfied, disappear and you, old exiled rebel, would be revenged. No one has ever proposed such a great work to you; no one ever thought you capable of so much! You will have the courage and power to drag the universe back into the nothing from which it was conceived and to fling your *No* in the face of the Lord's age-old *Yes*. This is my answer to your temptation, oh Devil. You offered me to be God; I offer you to be someone more powerful than God, that is, the destroyer of his masterpiece, the first and last Anti-God."

At this point, the words ceased to rise up to my lips and the inner spring dried up. I looked at my companion, who had listened to me with great attention, without moving or speaking.

Moment by moment, I waited for him to answer me, but he was still silent, gazing at the sun which was beginning to dissolve the mists on the plain. Little by little, from the height of

the slope, where rose our friendly cypress, the world unfolded itself at our feet.

The wind whistled softly, carrying torn shreds of cloud along with it. And still the Devil gazed and was silent. At last, he rose, turned towards me and said in a firm voice: "Let us go; I cannot stay any longer."

Then I realized that the Devil was weeping and for the first time I saw his eyes full of tears. Tears of regret, of rage, of joy? All day long I have thought of it and could not decide. Now I am awaiting the night so that I may ask him in my dreams.

6

The Diver's Prayer

THE very day I was nineteen, my father called me to him and said to me gravely and deliberately: "The Lord God demands that every man on earth should do some work. He does not love those who, seated by the wayside, watch the sowers and ploughmen at work. It is necessary then that without delay you should choose a craft that may give you an aim and understanding of your own life. Whatever your choice may be, I promise to put no obstacle in your way. Speak then and decide."

And I, who profoundly respect the Lord God and always obey my father, answered: "My choice is already made: I shall be a diver."

My father turned pale, but he answered without hesitation: "As you wish!"

So, from that day onwards, I was a diver. For many long years, I lived alone and in silence

under the great waters. I lived in every sea, I explored every ocean, I descended into every abyss. I met with skeleton galleys, with their old anchors blunt and rusted, full of gold-pieces, whose stamps were corroded by the water — great luminous monsters with soft eyes cast their spectral radiance over me — long greenish bodies, like those of the sirens, caressed me — I penetrated into the dark craters of submerged volcanoes — I trod the soil of the vanished Atalantes — I stumbled against the swollen corpses of ship-wrecked mariners — I struggled in the arms of giant polipi — and I brought back with me into the light of day heaps of marvellous pearls, of strange shells, of phosphorescent trees, the daggers that trembling assassins fling by night into the sea, the rings of the Doges, the golden cup of the King of Thule. . . .

There came then a day when I knew all the depths of the seas, all the valleys of the ocean, the darkest abysses, the most hidden treasures. There came a day when I was steeped in the scents of the sea, when I knew all the rhythms of the waves and the harmonies of the tempests. And then I thought that the Lord God might now be satisfied with my work and I decided to return

to live in my own city, amidst the human beings I had left long years before.

But no sooner had I reached the city, where I was born and where I hoped to die, than I was overcome by a sense of terrible disgust and torturing amazement. I no longer recognized nor loved the things that had known me as a child. Accustomed to the great subaqueous silences, illuminated by wonderful reflections and intense lights that come from below, I could not get used to the narrow, muddy hive that called itself a city. The sky seemed to me too near and pale — the city a strange sort of prison, furrowed by narrow filthy passages, where small animals covered with the cast-off skins of other animals ran up and down staring fiercely or lasciviously at each other. Noisy wooden boxes glided along the passages, dragging with them the little crouching imprisoned beasts inside — the air was heavy with smoke and dust and reeking with fetid breath and suffocating smells. The people gave me the impression of criminals condemned to death, who had gone mad waiting vainly for a reprieve. Their faces were hateful to me like those of the ash-coloured reptiles that lay their eggs near tombs — their eyes seemed

empty, as if the soul within had abandoned them — their words sounded like the wailing of hungry beggars or the convulsive cries of eagles, whose wings are being clipped. In their dark, narrow houses, I saw couches on to which they flung themselves at night as if they were dead — and tables covered with fragments of corpses and leaves brutally torn from the freshness of the earth. They had built spacious rooms in which they pretended to love and die, strutting about in festive clothes of many colours under the false light of arc-lamps — great halls where some of them, grotesquely dressed in black, were pretending to save their own country and the world in general by shouting vociferously — and other halls where scraps of canvas, covered with signs and colours, were fastened to the walls to make them dream of a better land than that in which they were living.

But I, who was accustomed to the overwhelming silences of the deep, could not understand many of their words and gestures. All that life, in the midst of which I had been born and had grown up, now seemed to me meaningless: a fearsome void, shameful, filthy, putrid as an underground den inhabited by feeble, blind, unclean beasts. It seemed to me that I had been

flung into a well haunted by wandering and fetid corpses, and at night, I had not even the strength to lift up my eyes, fearing that the stars too might have fled from the over-domesticated sky.

And I thought to myself: "What in all the world can have reduced me to this state? What can have changed my soul in such a terrible way that I see only the ridiculous, the gloomy, the ugly, wherever I look? The city is as I left it when I was young. In fact, they say that since that time it has made remarkable progress in every way. Why then does it seem to me, who have returned from the sea, so strange and so nauseating, to me who loved it with my whole heart when I was a child and who thought it more beautiful, more impressive, more hospitable than any other?"

I could find no answer to these questions. A friend, who came to my assistance in this terrible state of mind, advised me to read the books of physicians of the mind and body to find the origin and cure of what, with sincere grief, he called my mental aberration.

And I read hundreds and thousands of pages, by day and by night, always alert, always anxious in this search for health. But in no book did

I find what I sought. Then, shut up in my father's house, I thought and suffered for hundreds and thousands of hours, always alert, always fixed on this tremendous anxiety of finding health. But not yet have I found what I am seeking.

Now I turn to you, man who stand before me with the malevolent smile of an executioner on a holiday, with your eyes that have never seen the sky; I turn to you, man of precocious and insatiable perversity and of well-kept secrets, and I pray you, in the name of the earth from which you sprang, of the earth which feeds you, of the earth on which you drag out your days, I pray you to tell me why I do not understand and love the life of men.

And if you will but answer me, I will give you a pearl, which I gathered one day from the most fantastic valley of the sea and which no eye but my own has ever beheld.

7

The Beggar of Souls

EARLY in the evening, I had spent my last five cents on a cup of coffee, without having found in the customary drink the inspiration I sought and of which I was in dire need. At that time, I almost always suffered from hunger, hunger for bread, hunger for glory, and I had neither kith nor kin. The editor of a review — a pale silent man — accepted my stories when he had nothing better to publish and gave me ten dollars each time, neither more nor less, whatever might be the length or worth of what I brought him.

On that January evening, the air was full of wind and the sound of bells — a snarling, buffeting wind and horribly monotonous bells. I had entered the café — of white lights and sleepy faces — and had slowly emptied my cup, trying with all my might to awaken in my brain the

memory of some strange adventure, goading my imagination to create some story that should give me my livelihood for a day or so. That very evening, I had to write a story, to take it the next morning to the usual editor, who would advance me enough to be able to eat my fill. For this reason, I was painfully intent on the current of my thoughts, ready to jump at the first idea, at the first flash that might lend itself to fill the pile of ready-numbered white sheets that lay in front of me. Four and a quarter hours of useless, nerve-racking anticipation passed in this way. My soul was empty, my mind dull, my brain weary. At last I gave it up, put my last pennies down on the table and went out. No sooner was I outside than a sentence suddenly flashed through my mind — a sentence I had so often heard and the author of which I did not remember. " If any man, however ordinary, could tell the story of his life, it would make one of the greatest novels ever written." For about ten minutes, this sentence filled and dominated my mind, without leading to any result. But when I had almost reached home, I stopped suddenly and asked myself: " Why do you not do that? Why do you not tell the life of some man, some real man, the first ordinary man you meet? I am

not an ordinary man and besides, I have told my own life so often in my stories that I should not know what to say about it any more. I must find now, at once, some man, a man I do not know, an ordinary man and compel him to tell me who he is and what he has done. To-night I absolutely need a human life! I do not want to beg alms of anyone in money, but I shall beg and absolutely insist on receiving alms in biography!" This plan was so strange and so simple that I decided to carry it out immediately. I turned away from my house and directed my steps towards the centre of the town, where, at that late hour, I might still find men. And thus, a new and strange kind of beggar, I set out in search of my victim. I walked quickly, looking straight in front of me, fixing my eyes on the faces of the passers-by, seeking to choose well the one who should satisfy my need. Like a thief in the night or a pickpocket, I lay in wait at a street-corner that some man should pass, some ordinary man, of whom I might implore the largess of a confession.

The first to pass under the lamp — he was alone and appeared to me to be middle-aged — I had no wish to stop, since his deeply lined face was too interesting and I wanted to make the

experiment under less favourable conditions. A youth passed next, wrapped in a cloak, but his wavy hair and eyes of a hashish-eater held me back since in him I divined a dreamer, an eccentric, a soul neither common nor ordinary. The third to pass, old and clean-shaven, was humming to himself, with certain regretful variations, a popular Spanish air, which must have brought back to him a whole life of sunshine and love, a golden Bacchian southern life. He was not suitable either and I did not stop him.

I myself cannot rightly recall my rage at that moment. Imagine to yourself this singular would-be plunderer and beggar, hungry, excited, lying in wait at a crossroad for a man he does not know, who wants to hear a life he knows nothing of, who is burning to fling himself on an unknown prey. And by an absurd and annoying chance, the men who pass are not those he is looking for, they are men who bear on their faces the stamp of their unusualness and of their unordinary lives. What would I have given at that moment to see before me one of those innumerable pedants with faces as tranquil and rosy as that of a young pig, who had so often disgusted and amused me!

I was stubborn and courageous in those days

and went on waiting by the street-lamp whose light rose and fell with every puff of wind. The roads were already deserted at that hour and the wind had scattered the night-loiterers. A few hasty shadows alone gave life to the city. At last one of these shadows passed beneath the street-lamp by which I was waiting and immediately I saw he was the man for me. He was neither young nor old, neither good-looking nor the reverse, with untroubled eyes, well-curled whiskers and wearing a heavy well-to-do-looking overcoat.

No sooner had he passed by than I overtook and passed him. The man started back in alarm and raised an arm as if to defend himself, but immediately I reassured him. "Do not be afraid," I said in my most persuasive voice — "I am neither an assassin, nor a thief, nor even a beggar. A beggar, in truth, I am, but I am not going to ask you for money. I am only going to ask you for one thing and it is a thing that costs you nothing; the story of your life."

The man opened his eyes wide and drew back again. I realized he thought I was mad and so I went on as calmly as possible: "I am not what you believe, I am not mad. I am only something rather like it, a writer. I have to write a story

for to-morrow and that story will save me from hunger, and I want you to tell me who you are and what your life has been up to now, so that I can use it as the subject of my story. I have the greatest need of you, of your confession, of your life. Do not deny me this favour, do not refuse this help to a poor needy wretch. You are the man I was looking for and, with the material you give me, it may be I shall write my masterpiece!"

At these words, the man seemed touched and no longer looked at me in fear, but rather with pity.

"If my life is really so necessary to you," he said, "I have no difficulty in telling it to you, all the more so since it is perfectly simple. I was born thirty-five years ago of well-to-do, honest and right-thinking parents. My father was a clerk, my mother had a small income of her own. I was the only son and when I was six years old, I was sent to school. When I was eleven, I gained my elementary certificate without having worked either too much or too little. Then I entered High School, at sixteen college and at nineteen the University, at twenty-four I took my degree, again without having shown any sign of brilliant intelligence or hopeless stupid-

ity. When I had taken my degree, my father obtained a post for me on the railroad and introduced me to my fiancée. My work kept me busy for eight hours a day and required nothing more than a good memory and a little patience. Every six years, my salary automatically goes up forty dollars. I know that when I am sixty-four, I shall have a pension of $690.75. I approved of my fiancée and we were married after a year. There was never much unnecessary sentiment between us. I went to see her three times a week and twice a year — for her birthday and Christmas — I took her two presents and gave her two kisses. We have two children, a boy and a girl. The boy is ten years old and is to be an engineer; the girl is nine and is to be a school-mistress. I live quietly without any excitement, any desires. I get up every morning at eight and at nine in the evening, I go to a café where, with four of my colleagues from the office, I discuss the rain and the snow, the war and the government. And now that you are satisfied, let me go, because it is already ten minutes past the usual time at which I return home."

And having said all this in the most matter-of-fact voice, the man made a move to pass on. For a moment, I was stunned. That life, so

monotonous, ordinary, common, regular, so measured and foreseen in every detail, filled me with such intense sadness, such mad terror that I almost broke into tears and fled. And yet something held me back. "Here," I said to myself, "is the famous normal ordinary man, in whose name austere doctors despise and condemn us as crazy and degenerate! Here is the model man, the standard man, the true hero of our own time, the little wheel in the great machine, the little stone in the great rampart — the man who does not feed on unhealthy dreams and mad fancies. This man, whom I believed to be impossible, non-existent, imaginary, is here in front of me, terrifying and appalling, in the inconscience of his blank colourless content." But the man did not await the end of my thoughts and started to move away. Still beside myself, but persistent for all that, I followed him and asked:

"Is there really nothing else in your life? Has nothing happened to you? Has no one tried to kill you? Has your wife never deceived you? Have your superiors never persecuted you?"

"Nothing of all this has happened to me," he replied courteously but a little impatiently, "nothing of all you say. My life has been peace-

ful, uniform, regular, without too many joys, without great sorrows, without adventures. . . ."

"Absolutely no adventure," I interrupted him, "none at all? Try to remember, search your memory, I cannot believe that nothing has happened to you, never, not once. Your life would be too horrible!"

"I assure you I have had no adventure of any kind," replied the Ordinary Man with a great effort at politeness, "at least up to this evening. My meeting with you has been my first adventure. If you have really need of it, tell that."

And without giving me time to reply, he touched his hat slightly and walked on. For a moment or two, I stood rooted to the spot, under the incubus of this incredible thing. In the morning, I went back to my room but I did not write the story. And from that night, I have never laughed at ordinary men again.

8

The Man Who Could Not Love

SINCE Don Juan is married, it is almost impossible to meet him outside the house — above all in the evening.

His spare grey hair, his slightly bowed shoulders and — why not say it? — a persistent and chronic catarrh, keep him away from the world and its pomp. Yet one evening, in the middle of March, I saw Don Juan Tenorio talking in a public place to Joannes Buttadeus, known as the Wandering Jew.

In the midst of the ridiculous grandeur of a beer-house in the German style, under the glaring whiteness of the arc lamps, the two men were talking and shaking their grey heads, paying no attention to the red-lipped women and bored and languid youths who were idling and drinking around them. These two legendary figures had drunk their coffee and appeared to

be quite oblivious to the fact that the world contains students of folklore and professors of comparative poetry. They were behaving and talking as you and I, and their words distinctly reached my ears as I drew near to the iron table at which they were sitting. There was still a free chair next to them and I sat down. The two old men did not interrupt their conversation and barely glanced at me with a perfunctory smile, as if I had been a friend of their youth whom they had left but a few moments before.

" It is not easy, by no means easy," Don Juan was asserting emphatically, " to give an explanation of my history and it may be that I shall be dead before the secret of my life is revealed. I have occasionally gone to the theatres where they were giving one or another of my exploits, and have laughed more than anyone else at the ingenious parodies that make me out to be an insatiable libertine, chockful of voluptuousness and vanity, dragged to Hell in the end by the vengeance of God and the Commander.

" A wonderful thing not to be understood by these kings of the pit! Not even Molière, though he was a courtier and a comedian, has really grasped what I was. Beneath my sky-blue doublet and black-plumed hat, no one has succeeded in penetrating. Seductions, kisses, nocturnal flights, secret staircases, insidious trysts, ambushes, rapes, masques and banquets, and the white tombstone and last feast — everything that was outward, conventional, fictitious, all that and nothing more, the writers of tragi-comedies and poems saw in me. A picturesque seducer, a capricious cavalier, a voluptuous lover: that is what I am for them and for those who read their works. And not one of these great revealers of the human heart has discovered the desperate reason of all my adventures; not one of them has guessed that I was a libertine in spite of myself and fickle against my will!

" Could I but recall the nights of my adolescence when, before I fell asleep, I tried to imagine and decide what my life would be! There was never a gentler, purer child than I. I thought of love as a sacred thing and of women as a mysterious prize that awaited me on the threshold of youth. Then youth came, and spring, and the stars trembled and the trees grew green again and the women too put on their light spring dresses. But love did not come. For me, love remained a word. I felt none of the emotion that makes men suddenly turn pale. I had no starts nor tremors at the sight of a be-

loved face, at the sound of a beloved voice. My senses awakened but my heart remained calm, unmoved, measured, as it had been before. I had the craving for love but not the capacity to love. I felt I should never be able to love, never know the fears and burning of passion. I felt I could have taken delight in women, made them love me, but that never for a moment would they succeed in touching my heart or stirring my soul. At first, I refused to believe in this inability to love and sought in every way to belie my first experiences, since I believed in the beauty and greatness of love and did not want women to be a mere game and amusement for me. By every means then, I sought to arouse in myself this passion of which I felt myself spontaneously incapable; I tried every method to induce the mad flame of love, if only once, to envelop me.

" I thought I might attain my end if I behaved in every way as if I were already in love, hoping that by dint of repeating certain words and performing certain acts, the sentiment, which these words and acts serve to express in others, would awaken in me too. For this reason, I feigned love perfectly and imitated all the gestures, smiles, glances, words and expressions that lovers use. Not once but a thousand times, I re-

peated the tenderest endearments, the most glowing confidences, the most impassioned passages of lyric poetry — kisses, caresses, sighs, long hours passed beneath a window; night-long vigils, wrapped in my cloak, awaiting the appearance of a well-known light; I wrote raving letters, I forced myself to weep tears of emotion and even managed to compromise myself in the eyes of the world, by solemnly plighting my troth to a young girl who had taken my amorous comedy too seriously. But it was all in vain. My painstaking fiction, studied from the most perfect models and the most celebrated books, was worth nothing. I continued to be incapable of true love; again and again, every day, every moment, I had to recognize my radical inability to love.

" Then began my legendary life, that life which has made me the type of the inconstant libertine. Up to that time, I had been physically chaste and had sought with all the strength of my soul that powerful and terrible passion, by which all men are overcome at least once. But I could not resign myself to my incapacity to love. Still, and all my life long, I wanted to tempt fate. I hoped that perhaps suddenly love would well up in my heart, more impetuous and intense for

the long delay. I believed that up to that moment I had not felt it because I had not yet met the woman who could set free the fount of passion in my innermost heart. And I started desperately to seek this woman, I scoured every country, every city on earth, the whole world, seducing, attracting, conquering, virgins, wives and widows, always restless, indefatigable, discontented and dissatisfied; always lying in wait for this only woman, this unknown liberator, who must exist somewhere, whom I must meet, who must make me know immortal love. And there were women who loved me and women who fled with me and women who wept for me and women who died for me, but never did I know the joy and wonder of finding her who would make my heart beat and overwhelm my spirit. I possessed the bodies of innumerable women and I felt beating against my breast the hearts of innumerable mistresses, yet never for an hour was I capable of mingling my soul with the soul of her who loved me. Beside them, my spirit remained cold, clear, insensible; interested only in the shape of their limbs and in the graceful curiosity of their little burning souls. I looked into their eyes — black eyes, blue eyes, grey eyes, eyes blazing with desire and pas-

sion — and in their reflection I saw my own face and their shining joy at knowing me near, but never for a moment were my own eyes veiled and, when I had possessed them at my will, I left them without a regret.

" Then it was said that I was a vicious libertine who sought only to gratify his lusts and despised love. Instead of which, I passed from one woman to another, from one adventure to another, seeking the one true love, and my fickleness grew from the constancy that was determined to meet it and my caprices were born from the despair of never finding it. They thought I was amusing myself whilst I was grieving for the vainness of my search; they said I was cruel whilst it was fate that was cruel to me. I sought a thousand women because I could not succeed in loving one of them truly and they imagined I was playing with them all. They did not see beneath the apparent levity of the fickle cavalier all the raging sadness of the *lover unrequited by love*. Many women suffered through my fault but not one of them, even amid the tears and sobs of passion, ever knew the harsh despair of my soul, unslaked by their white bodies and its easy success. Beneath the mask of my legend is the bitter smile of one

who was loved too much, but never loved himself."

The old seducer was silent and his companion started to talk in a far-away voice.

" What you have said is perhaps true and certainly terrible. But you have only given the inner cause, the summary of your legend and you have offered no new interpretation, you have added no new meaning to it. I, who from century to century have wandered over the face of the earth and from solitude have learnt reflection, I, who like the wandering Oedipus have become an interpreter of enigmas and a tragic philosopher, clearly see the lesson which transpires from your sad story. What men wished to condemn and kill in you is *the love of diversity, the love of change*. In the face of your passing from woman to woman, in the face of the continual inconstancy of your tastes and desires, they have erected the rigid white statue of the Commander, the true symbol, as a logician would say, of the conception of immobility as opposed to the continuel changefulness of intuition. And it is for this reason, oh Don Juan, that you are my brother! In me too, men have expressed their hatred and fear of change.

" They condemned me to wander eternally,

imagining that the continual changing from one place to another, and ever seeing new things, the never having a fixed abode, a permanent haunt from birth to death, was the most terrible curse the soul of man could suffer. Instead of which, I converted their sentence into a carnival, I made myself a wonderful soul, that of a traveller, an explorer, a pilgrim, a knight-errant, an amateur globe-trotter, and so, in the midst of continual diversity and perpetual change, I live a much fuller, richer life than my judges and executioners. You and I, Don Juan, are the heroes of diversity and change, and the slaves of a sole house and a sole woman have sought to wither us with their contempt. But we, Don Juan, run more quickly than they and they soon crawl back under the ground to brood over their chary happiness."

But Don Juan was not listening to the sententious traveller who was no sooner silent than he resumed the train of his thoughts.

" Beneath the mask of my legend, there may be a smile, a bitter smile, but in my heart there is only the ever-renewed anguish of my disillusions. Now I am old and shall never know what love is. The woman I was seeking has never come to meet me and, when old age came and

I needed rest and care, I found no one but an old servant who would take my name. And now Don Juan lives between his dead memories and his useless hopes and has no other pleasure than to light his fire with some passionate love-letter."

The Wandering Jew was just about to draw another of his philosophical conclusions to Don Juan's words, when an obsequious little man dressed in black, with a mole on his left cheek, came to announce that the beer-house was about to close. Don Juan took a large gold-piece out of his purse, but the little man looked at it and refused it. It was a Spanish doubloon of the year 1662. Joannes Buttadeus, who was more practical, drew a silver coin from his pocket, clinked it on the table and then, all three together, we went out into the deserted square, laughing loudly at nothing.

9

The Last Visit of the Sick Gentleman

NO one ever knew the real name of him they called the Sick Gentleman. Nothing was left of him, after his sudden disappearance, but the memory of his unforgettable smile and a portrait by Sebastiano del Piombo, which pictures him hidden in the soft shadow of a fur cloak, with one gloved hand falling limply at his side like that of a man asleep. Some one or other who loved him more dearly — and I was amongst those few — remembers the strange parchment-like transparency of his skin, the almost feminine lightness of his walk and the habitual perplexity of his eyes. He loved to talk but no one understood what he wanted to say and I know some who did not *want* to understand him, because the things he said were too horrible.

He was, in truth, a *sower of fear*. His mere presence gave a fantastic trend to the simplest things

— when his hand touched some object, it seemed as if that object became part of the world of dreams. His eyes did not reflect things present, but things unknown and far away, that those who were with him could not see. No one ever asked him what his sickness might be, nor why he appeared to give no thought to it. He was perpetually moving, never resting night and day. No one knew where his house was, no one knew his father nor brothers. One day, he would appear in the town and after years, he would disappear again as suddenly as he had come.

This morning, as the first glimmer of dawn appeared in the sky, he came to wake me in my room. I felt the soft caress of his glove on my forehead and saw him standing before me, wrapped in his fur cloak, with his lips that eternally bore the memory of a smile and his eyes that were more perplexed than ever. I realized from the redness of his eyelids that he had watched the whole night and he must have anxiously awaited the dawn, since his hands were trembling and his whole body shaking with fever.

" What is the matter? " I asked. " Does your sickness trouble you more than on other days? "

" My sickness? " he replied, " my sickness?

Then you, like the rest, believe I *have* a sickness? That there is a sickness that *is mine?* Why do you not say that *I myself am a sickness?* But there is nothing that is mine, do you understand? There is nothing that belongs to me! I belong to someone else; there is someone who owns me! "

I was used to his strange way of talking, so I did not reply. I went on looking at him and my gaze must have been very gentle, since he came to my bed again and touched my forehead once more with his soft glove.

" You have no trace of fever," he went on, " you are perfectly sane and calm. Your blood flows smoothly in your veins. I can therefore tell you something which will perhaps alarm you; I can tell you, that is, who I am. Listen to me carefully, I beg you, because it may be that I could not tell you the same things twice, and I must tell them at least once."

Saying this, he flung himself into the crimson armchair that stood next to my bed and went on in a louder voice:

" I am not a real man. I am not like others, a man of bone and muscle, a man conceived by man. I was not born like your companions; no one rocked me and watched me grow; I have

never known either the restlessness of youth or the sweetness of blood-ties. I am — and I wish to say it, though you may not perhaps believe me — I am nothing more than a *dream-figure*. For me, Shakespeare's words have become literally and tragically true: *I am of the stuff that dreams are made of!* I exist because there is *one* who dreams of me; there is one who sleeps and dreams and sees me acting and living and moving and at this moment is dreaming that I am saying all this. When this one started to dream of me, I started to exist; when he wakes, I shall cease to exist. I am a part of his imagination, a creation of his brain, a guest of his long nightly wanderings. The dream of this man is so lasting and intense that I have become visible even to men who are awake. But the world of waking, the world of actual reality is not mine. I feel so uncomfortable in the midst of the vulgar solidness of your existence! My true life is that which runs slowly in the soul of my sleeping creator. . . .

" Do not think that I am talking in riddles and symbols. What I am telling you is the truth, the simple, tremendous truth. Stop opening your eyes in amazement! Stop looking at me with your pathetic air of dismay!

" To be acting a dream is not what torments me most. There are poets who have said that the life of man is but the shadow of a dream, and there are philosophers who have suggested that all reality is but an hallucination. I am haunted by another idea: *Who is he who dreams me?* Who is this *one,* this unknown being whom I have never met and whose property I am, who called me forth suddenly from the darkness of his tired brain, as a flame rises at a sudden breath of wind? How many days long have I thought of this master of mine who is sleeping, of this creator of mine who watches the flow of my ephemeral life! He must certainly be great and powerful; a being for whom our years are but minutes, and who can live the whole life of man in one of his hours and the history of mankind in one of his nights. His dreams must be so vivid, so strong and deep as to throw out their images and make them appear as real things. Perhaps the whole world is nothing but the everchanging result of the crossing of dreams of such beings as himself. But I do not want to generalize too much; let us leave metaphysics to the rash! The overwhelming fact that I am the imaginary creature of a stupendous dreamer is enough for me.

"Who can he be? This is the question that has worried me for ages, since first I discovered the material of which I am made. You can well understand how important this problem was for me. My whole future fate hung on the reply I could find to it. Dream-people enjoy a great deal of liberty and for that reason my life was not entirely preordained by my origin, but depended to a great extent on my own free will. At first, I was terrified at the thought that the least thing might wake him and so destroy me. A cry, a noise, a breath, could of a sudden hurl me into nothingness. I clung to life at that time and so I tormented myself vainly trying to guess what the tastes and passions of my unknown possessor might be, in order to give my life the forms and attitudes that might be dear to him. Every moment, I trembled at the idea of doing something that might offend him, alarm him and so wake him. For some time, I imagined he must be a kind of evangelical and fatherly deity and so I strove to lead the most virtuous and saintly life possible. On other days, I thought rather that he might be some pagan hero and then I crowned myself with vine-leaves, sang Bacchic hymns and danced with sylvan nymphs in the forest-clearings. Once I

even believed myself to be part of the dream of some sublime and eternal sage who had reached a higher spiritual world than ours and I spent long nights studying the stars and the dimensions of the world and the composition of living beings.

"But at last, I grew tired and humiliated at the thought of being a puppet to this unknown and unknowable master; I realized that this pretence of life was not worth such baseness and abject servility. Then I started to long for what had at first horrified me, that is to say, his awakening. I strove to fill my life with such horrors that the terror of them should awaken him. And I tried everything to attain the peace of annihilation; I endeavoured by every conceivable means to break off this sorry comedy of my apparent life, to destroy this ridiculous mask of life that made me resemble other men! No crime was strange to me, no wickedness unknown, no terror held me back. With fiendish cruelty I killed harmless old men; I poisoned the water of entire cities; I set fire to the hair of a whole multitude of women. With my teeth, made savage by the lust of destruction, I tore to pieces the children I met on my way. At night, I sought the company of gigantic hissing monsters, such as men have

forgotten; I took part in the most incredible adventures of gnomes, ghouls, hobgoblins, phantoms; I flung myself from the top of a mountain into a rugged, barren valley, surrounded by caves full of blanched bones, and sorcerers taught me the howls of wild beasts in the night, that make even the strongest men tremble. It seems to me that he, whose dream I am, cannot take fright at the things that make you other men tremble. It may be that he enjoys the sight of all that is most horrible or that he does not care or that he is not afraid. Up to this day, I have not succeeded in waking him and I have to drag on this miserable life, servile and unreal as it is.

" Who then will set me free from my dreamer? When will the dawn break that calls him to his work? When will the bell chime, the cock crow, the voice ring out, that shall wake him? I have been waiting so long for my freedom! With such longing, I await the end of this stupid dream in which I play so dreary a part!

" What I am doing now is my last attempt. I am telling him who dreams me that I am a dream; I want him to dream he is dreaming. It happens to men, does it not? And it happens that, when they realize they are dreaming, then they awake. That is why I have come to you and

have told you all this and I want him who has created me to realize that at this moment I do not exist as a real man, and then at the same instant, my existence as a creature of the imagination will end too. Do you think I shall succeed? Do you think that by dint of repeating it and crying it aloud, I shall suddenly wake my invisible owner? "

Saying these words, the Sick Gentleman stirred in his armchair, slipped his glove from his left hand and put it on again, looking at me the while with eyes that were more perplexed than ever. It seemed as if from one moment to the other he were expecting something wonderful and fearsome to happen. His face looked like that of a dying man. He gazed at his body from time to time as if he were expecting to see it melt away, and stroked his damp forehead with nervous hands.

" You believe all this, do you not? " he resumed, " you feel I am not lying? But why can I not disappear, why not be free to end it? Can it be that I am part of a dream that will never end? The dream of an everlasting sleeper, an everlasting dreamer? Drive this awful idea away! Comfort me a little; suggest some plan, some intrigue, some fraud that will suppress

me! I beg you with all my heart. Have you no pity for this distracted ghost?"

And as I was still silent, he looked at me once more and rose. He seemed to me taller than before and again I noticed his peculiarly transparent skin. He was obviously suffering terribly. His whole body was trembling: he was like an animal that was struggling to free itself from a net. The gentle gloved hand pressed mine and it was for the last time. Murmuring something in a low voice, he went out of my room and there is *one* alone who has seen him after that hour.

10

The Mirror That Flees . . .

ON an impossible winter's morning, in a well-known station, a man whom I do not know — wearing an overcoat with two violets in his buttonhole — tried to prove to me that men are happy, that life is great and that the world is beautiful. I listened to him with interest, flicking the ash from my cigarette which, untouched, was burning down in the wind. I listened and smiled and the Man I do not know grew more and more excited, so that he had already passed from humour to sentiment, to enthusiasm, to frenzy. The flow of his words, rapid, fluent, decisive, as if freshly coined in some spot but a little while before, intoxicated me like champagne. Something prickly and bubbling — a longing to embrace someone and weep, to dance, to burst into little peals of laughter. . . .

At a certain moment, his voice said: "Think of the greatness of the progress that is taking place beneath our eyes — of the progress that leads men from the past to the future, from that which is no longer to that which is not yet, from that which is remembered to that which is hoped. Savages do not foresee the future, do not think of what is coming; they do not foresee and they do not provide. But we, we civilized men, live for the future and by grace of the future. Our whole life is turned towards that which must come, is built in view of what will happen. Men consecrate to-day to to-morrow, always, every to-day that passes to the to-morrow that will pass — with respect and courage.

"This enormous progress of the prophetic spirit is what makes light of dangers, what gives us strength, what makes us discover new possibilities, makes us lords of the earth, the sea and the sky and of a thing which is worth all these — of ourselves!"

But just then, an express train arrived in the station. Its solemn rumbling at the crossings, its whistle, sharp, decided, irritable, interrupted the discourse of the Man I do not know. When the train had slowed down and only the short puffs of the engine were heard, and the trav-

ellers had dispersed, the Man wanted to go on talking, but I cut him short:

"Sir Man," I said to him, "has this train which has just arrived told you nothing that applies to our case? Have you not understood its reply? Must I repeat it to you, I, a humble translator, since I can translate the language of trains and of many other things? Until a few minutes ago, this train was running at an average speed of sixty miles an hour — a little, crowded, brilliantly lit-up world, across the lonely, misty country. And now suddenly it has stopped and the inhabitants of this little flying city have disappeared and the engine-driver is wiping his forehead disconsolately. The wheels are standing idly on the rails and the dark, empty carriages regretfully recall the passengers' lively chatter and the many-coloured bags. So ends a flight when you travel on rails. But let us leave the train and return to men. Just now, I am thinking of an absurd thing and I will tell you what it is, Sir Man, and I will tell you since there are no crowds to hear me. If all those I would like were here, I should say:

"'Imagine, men, an impossible thing, an absurd thing, mad, incredible, terrible. Imagine if at a certain moment, the world stopped sud-

denly and that everything stayed at the point at which it was and every man became immovable, as if he were a statue, in the attitude in which he was at the moment, in the act which he was performing. . . . If this happened and notwithstanding all this, thought still went on in the minds of men and they could remember and judge what they had done and what they were doing and could consider all they had achieved since their birth and could think of all they wished to achieve before their death, imagine the burning despair beneath the tragic silence of this world suddenly stopped dead!'

"I do not know whether you have the courage to realize how horrible it would be. Strive for a moment to see all these men, suddenly made immovable whilst intent on their works, panting after their dreams, carried away by their unclean passions, hard-pressed by their desires. See them there, scattered over the earth, suspended by a catastrophe that has changed them into thinking dolls, into desperate statues. See them in the most repulsive and ridiculous attitudes, in the most difficult and the most stupid. Here is a man overtaken in heavy sleep with his mouth wide-open like a drunken corpse — here is a man in the act of love, stretched like a beast

over a woman with closed eyes — here is a thief in the night with his shifty eyes and his lamp that will never more go out — here is the black-robed judge dispensing blood and hell from his high seat — here is the wretch who drags himself through the mud of the city seeking a bone or a coin — here is the woman, her face white with powder, leaning forward with a lascivious smile on her lips — here is the merchant gesticulating with bony hands to gain another shekel or two — here is the weary peasant goading on his oxen — here the accomplished speaker struck dumb between a smile and a compliment — here the soldier with fixed bayonet in front of a closed door: and the assassin brewing his poisons in a garret; and the workman bent over his huge machines, oily, immovable, sinister; and the scientist who cannot take his weary eyes from the microscope where the invisible atoms have stopped their dance.

"Imagine now, if your heart does not fail you, the thoughts of all these men condemned in an instant to the consciousness of their death. Do you believe there is *one* man — *one*, you understand? — *one single* man who would be glad of that moment in which destiny has rendered him immovable? Do you believe that for a single one

of these men it would be the moment of Faust, the glorious, fleeting moment which we would hold fast, fix and keep for all eternity? You certainly do not believe it, you cannot believe it!

" You, Sir Man, here present before me, have spoken a great and tremendous truth. Men think of the future, live for the future, perpetually consecrate all the to-days to the to-morrows that must come. Every man lives only for what he foresees, awaits and hopes. His whole life is so organized that each moment is only valuable to him in so far as it leads to the succeeding moment, each hour to the hour that will come, each day to the day that will follow. His whole life is made of dreams, of ideals, of plans, of expectations — all his present is made up of thoughts about his future. Everything that is, that is at the moment, seems to us dark, pitiful, insufficient, imperfect, and we comfort ourselves by thinking that all this present is but a preface, a long, wearisome preface to the beautiful romance that is to come. All men, whether they know it or not, live by this faith. If they were suddenly told that within an hour they must die, all that they are doing and have done would have no taste for them, no flavour, no value. Without the mirror of the future, the reality of

the moment would seem base, lurid, insignificant. Without the to-morrow which makes us hope in revenge, in victory, in upward flight, in promotion and increase, in conquests and forgetfulness, men would no longer consent to live. Without the far-away perfume of to-morrow, they would refuse to eat the hard black bread of to-day.

" Think then of these men stopped suddenly, who can no longer act but can still think. Think of these men imprisoned in an eternal to-day, without the release of their consciousness. What agony must gnaw at their entrails and rend their nerves! Immovable in their shameful and criminal postures, sad and idiotic, with no possibility of hope, without the light of dreams, without the sweetness of plans, with their wings clipped, their legs bound, their hands chained, like an immense crowd of Michael-Angelesque prisoners confined in the limits of their pitiful, melancholy, repulsive lives; in the limits of those lives which they only bore in the hope and expectation of a fairer, wider one — they, these prisoners condemned to perpetual inaction, will recognize at last, with infinite rage, the absurd stupidity of their former life. They will realize that *they sacrificed the whole present to a fu-*

ture which in its turn became the present and which was sacrificed in its turn to another future and so to the last present, to death. The whole value of to-day was in to-morrow and the to-morrow had only value for another to-morrow and so on until it reached the last, definite to-day. Thus the whole of life had passed in preparing from day to day, from hour to hour, from minute to minute, for that which never came. And they will discover this tremendous thing: that *the future does not exist as the future,* that the future is but a creation and part of the present and that to bear this sad, restless, sorrowful life for this future which from day to day flees into the distance, is the most painful folly of this most foolish life.

"Men, we lose life for death, we waste the real for the imaginary, we value our days only because they lead us to days which have no other value than to lead us to other days like unto themselves. . . . Men, your whole life is an atrocious fraud, which you contrive to your hurt and only demons could laugh in cold blood at your mad pursuit of the mirror that flees!"

Another train, screeching and rumbling, thundered into the station and once more the travellers dispersed and the engine-driver wiped his

forehead disconsolately. The Man I do not know was still before me — wearing an overcoat with two violets in his buttonhole — although I had forgotten all about him.

"These," I said to him, "are my ideas on progress, on the future and on life. I am sure you do not agree with me, but I agree with someone — for instance, with the fog that so often seeks to cover the earth and hide one man from another, misery from contempt, ugliness from melancholy. And I, Sir Man, am exceedingly fond of trains that stop after useless flights and fogs that veil what they cannot destroy."

The Man I do not know had become very nervous and all his enthusiasm had vanished like a whiff of smoke. Instead of replying, he took the two violets from his buttonhole and offered them to me. I accepted them with a bow, sniffed them and inhaled their delicate perfume.

II

I No Longer Want To Be Myself

Y tan alta vida espero
Que muero porque no muero.
SANTA TERESA

ONLY ten hours ago, I realized my horrible condition. Until ten hours ago, I did not know the most horrible thing in the world. I thought that for some years I had been a *graduate in terribleness*. I had tried, thought, imagined, dreamt all that is, that will be, that can be most fearsome, most tormenting, most horrifying, most monstrously and madly agonizing. I knew the anxiety of nightly vigils; the desperation of last kisses; the trembling at silent apparitions; the delirium of nightmares; the starting at invisible clocks that strike the never-ending hours of the night; the despairing groans of souls without shelter; the wandering fever of demonic colloquies. But I did not yet know the most terrible thing in the world — I did not

know the last, the supreme torture. Ten hours ago only it was revealed to me and already it seems to me that many dynasties have passed by on earth and that many suns have left the heavens.

I will try to be calm. I will try to be clear. I will choose the shortest, simplest, most natural formula: *I have realized that I cannot be other than myself*. I have realized that I can *never — never* — cease to be myself.

Perhaps I have not explained sufficiently. It is this then: I want to change. But to change seriously — do you understand? to change completely, entirely, radically. *To be a different person* in short. To be a different person, who has no relation to me, who has not the least point of contact with me, who does not even know me, whom I have never known.

Lightly-made changes and renovations, I have known them for so long! It is a question of dusting, of removing, of white-washing. You change the map of France but the room is always the same — you change the colour of your overcoat but the body it covers is always the same — you change the position of the furniture, you hang up a new picture, you add a bookshelf, a more comfortable armchair, a bigger

table, but it is the same room — always, inexorably, implacably, the same room. It has the same air, the same face, the same *spiritual atmosphere*. You change the front of the house and inside it has the same stairs and the same rooms — you change the cover, you change the title, the decoration of the frontispiece, the letters of the text, the initials of the chapters, but the book always tells the same story — always, inexorably, implacably, the same old, gloomy, lamentable story.

I am tired now of this kind of change and renovation. How often have I too swept out my poor soul, how often given a new tinge to my brain, how often put order into the confusion of my heart! I have made new clothes for myself, have travelled in new countries, lived in new cities, but always I have felt, in the innermost depths of my heart, that something was left over, that it is I, that it is always I myself, who may change my face, my voice, my walk, but am always the same, like a tireless, inflexible guardian. Around him things disappear, but he keeps no record of them; around him things appear and he pays no heed. . . .

And now I am tired of always living with myself. I have been living in my own company for

twenty-four years. Now I have enough of it: I am definitely annoyed. Annoyed only? What am I dreaming of? Say rather that I am disgusted, repelled, nauseated, by this self of mine with which I have lived for twenty-four years on end.

And I think finally, I have the right to leave myself. When a house does not please us, we can remove; when an instrument is of no more use to us we throw it into the sea. And is not my body a house — be it hut or temple? And is not my soul an instrument — be it scythe or lyre?

Yet I cannot remove from my body and I cannot throw my soul into some sea. Every time I approach a mirror, I see my pale thin face, with my mouth half-open, as if thirsting for air or famished for prey, with my hair as thick and tangled as that of a savage, with my eyes the colour of stagnant water, in which the great black pupils look out like serpents' lairs.

And every time I review my spirit, I find the cherished but everyday acquaintances: faces that grin with desperate tenderness, faces that weep with a little shame, mysterious faces hidden under shocks of inky-black hair, and far away echoes of lively Rossinian melodies and Diderot's witticisms, of Beethoven's sympho-

nies and Lapo Gianni's verses, of Scarlatti's arias and George Berkeley's apothegms, of flute cadenzas accompanying the dancing of frivolous fair women, organs pealing beneath mosaics of gold and violet, and processions of patricians clad in purple, across great halls, empty and dimly lit.

And innumerable other things I find and rediscover in the soul that was so dear to me, that I nourished with such abundance and decked with such care. But it is always my soul: something of what has been is still in it and no one could ever make it not to have been there.

Who then, amongst these men who love their hearthstones and their dried flowers, will teach me to free myself from my body and my soul? Who can make me *no longer to be myself*, that I change into another, so that I do not even remember what I am now? Who, man or demon, can give me what I ask with all the desperation of my soul that is at war with itself?

An old demon, kicking up his heels, suggested to me a little while ago an age-old way: to kill myself. But I have no confidence in that demon. I have not known him long and I have reason to believe that he is in league with the gravediggers and coiners of epigrams, for more than

once I have seen him wandering about the churchyards. And on the other hand, what use would it be? I have not the least desire to annihilate myself, not to live. I want to be, but to be something different; I still want to live, but to live another life. I have no sympathy at all with suicide. I had never any liking for that poor devil of a Werther, who killed himself because he could not find another pretty doll, and even less do I like his imitators who are generally more unbearable still than the poor sentimental product of provincial Germany himself. Pistols, with their gleaming barrels that stick out stupidly into the air, seem to me useless as dissecting instruments; poison annoys me even in English novels with Italian plots, and as for hanging, I think it is scarcely worthy of the most despicable of my enemies.

I have no wish at all *not to be*, but I have a desperate and overwhelming desire *to be different, to be someone else*. And I have also a desperate desire *not to be who I am*, because I am such that I want *what I can never have*. I want not to be myself because I know that I can never not be myself.

Now I have come down to the absurd. I have reached the point when *no one* can know what I

say and what I want. No one will ever know what is in me, in these fearsome moments. No one, absolutely no one, not even the most perceptive, psychologic, Stendhalian of my familiar demons.

He is here with me now. His face is redder and more swollen than usual and under his wolf-skin cap, his sly, half-closed eyes look at me with a disconcerting calmness. He has seen what I am writing and more than once he has smiled with indescribable satisfaction. And at this moment, he is saying to me in his sarcastically caressing voice: " Remember, my friend, the doctor who was looking for the mule whilst he was riding on it. You are rather like him this evening. You are seeking to be someone else. But he who has a wish that no one ever had is already, before men, on the best road not to be what he is. And you are in that condition, my dear, hot-headed friend. You are on the threshold of your soul and perhaps — who knows — you may come out from it if you are not too much afraid of the darkness that lies beyond."

And having said this, he walked away quickly, leaving my room filled with a faint smell of incense.

12

A Man Amongst Men

I

IMAGINE to yourself a man who is contemplating a stupendous undertaking, that would seem mad even to the wildest imagination — a man who has a secret purpose in his heart of such a nature as to confound history, life, the world itself, and that this man neither can nor will as yet say anything of what he thinks of doing and will do, and those around him have no inkling of what is impending. Imagine the ecstasy and torture of this man. Alone, speechless, with rapid steps and unheeding eyes, he walks amongst his fellow-men, and no one looks at him in wonder, no one follows him, no one draws on one side and gazes at him in amazement. To look at, he is a man like all the rest. In dress, in looks, in the shape of his body, he is

like them, a man amongst men and nothing more! He walks through the crowded streets and no one points him out; they look at him yet do not see him, and at the most some idler will smile at his untidy hair and dreamy aspect. But imagine the soul of this man who passes with his invisible secret in the midst of his unseeing fellow-men, who passes in their midst, silent and distrait and bears within himself that which can change their whole life, their future and their fate; who mixes with them, who brushes them with his arm, who knocks against them, and who does not yet want to say the word nor fulfil the deed that will turn all eyes towards him, that will bend all wills to his own, that will give light to all these blind and new words to all these stammerers. The man runs on with his rapid steps and stupendous dreams and can already see himself at the moment of revelation, and all his work rises before him like a divine mirage. Already he feels the virile joy of creation, his stout heart thrills, his grey eyes open wide as if carried away by passion.

Imagine the joy of this man with his mad secret. Imagine the keenness of his pleasure whilst

he crosses the indifferent, contemptuous crowd that knows nothing of him, that believes him to be a part of itself, an atom of its great body, a man amongst men and nothing more. The crowd knows nothing of what is going on in the brain of the man who is passing. It sees his shabby clothes, his uncertain gait, his flowing hair, his emaciated face, and cannot distinguish him from others who look like him. And yet a time will come when many will seek to remember when and how they saw him, will invent sayings and words he never spoke, will swear they were his friends and neighbours in the time of his obscurity. But for the moment, he is not this *he*, he is a cipher, an element, a unit, a citizen, a name, a poll-ticket. His day has not yet come. Men cannot see beyond their own eyes and they never think that within that commonplace body is a mind capable of starting a new chapter in the history of the world.

He is like a man walking in the night and beneath his cloak he bears a lighted lamp that will dazzle those who see it when the cloak is opened. He is like a God in disguise who will make the man tremble to whom he first addresses a word.

2

Imagine then this man and his thoughts, oh many for whom I am speaking, oh many of incredible blindness. And do not imagine him as a vain dream, as the phantasy of a moment. Imagine him as something possible, as something that might be true, as something that *perhaps* is true. Imagine him then — oh you of little sight — as something true, real, present, as something that actually exists to-day, at this hour, at this moment, near to you, in the midst of you! I tell you this man exists! I tell you he exists and is making ready. I tell you that this man walks in your ways, enters your houses, looks into your eyes. This man is watching, thinking, arming himself. His day has not yet come but it will come. Now his lips speak only the wonted words of men, but in that day, they will speak others. Now he passes humbly amongst you but one day he will stand before you, alone, and all will see him and remember that in some fleeting moment of their pitiful lives they awaited his coming.

Beware of this man! His secret gnaws and tears at his heart, but he does not wince nor

show his pain. His dream exalts, inspires, sanctifies him, but he does not show his gladness.

A terrible man, a man who seems the tomb of his hopes and, instead, is a fire ready to scatter sparks and burn all your filthy, tottering cities. Learn to distinguish him in the crowd, run after him all together, overpower him and perhaps you will succeed in putting out his lamp with your breath, in suffocating its flame with the ashes of your dead dreams.

Be on your guard, keep watch on every hand. Perhaps at this very moment he is near you — perhaps to-morrow he will pass by your house and you, from your window, will follow him with your eyes for a moment or two — perhaps it is he who yesterday turned to look at you as if surprised by some memory you evoked.

You do not know whence he will come. You do not know what will be his name nor his origin. Think of all the ancient revelations that were preceded by silence and universal inconscience; think of those who knew Christ when he was a child. How many of them will have thought that this child would give the world a new meaning and men a new word of life? How many will have guessed that his fair head would be bowed on a cross and that from his pale lips would issue

forth the mighty words that would give health to the sick and raise the dead? And think of all those who at a certain moment become guides, prophets, reformers, and whom no one knew how to distinguish from the rest until they had said and done that which they had to say and do. There has been for all great and famous men, for all prophets and creators, a time when they were obscure and unknown, when they looked like the rest, when they seemed men and nothing more. No one troubled then about their origin, no one looked at them in wonder, no one sought to remember their first words and describe their looks, their habits, their outward life. And when suddenly, they rose above all of you — oh many whose eyes are veiled — you marvelled and harassed yourselves that you had not guessed the miracle that was about to happen. And even to-day, I repeat it to you all, even to-day, some miracle is impending. Every age must have its heroes and its prophets.

In your midst to-day, neither seen nor suspected, is the hero and prophet of to-morrow. It is impossible that this man should not already exist. He is living in the shadow, his light is still hidden, but he is there, he is living, walking with rapid steps in your midst; like you, yet

even now not a man amongst men, but the future shepherd in the midst of his flocks, the future general in the midst of his armies.

I would awaken in you the understanding and expectation of this master who is living our life, next to your life, and whom you neither know nor suspect. I would arouse in you the fear of the unknown that comes from this Man. Seek him in your crowds, seek him unceasingly, and let no one escape you; let every eye tell you its secret. He exists and *is watching you:* do you not feel the weight of his look on your petty life! He exists and is waiting: do you not feel the oppressiveness of a vigil too long drawn out?

There he is in your midst — alone, speechless, with rapt eyes. . . . He has stopped for a moment and is gazing at you. But now he has resumed his rapid walk and, in the growing crowd and gathering mist, is but a man amongst men, a shadow amongst shadows, a terrible hope in the midst of a thousand blindnesses.

13

Elegy For That Which Was Not

WHEN, in the night that has not yet sunk into silence, in the shadow of the gloomy *palazzi* that loom like prisons, I go back to my tower, where I pass my life contemplating three sister towers, walking leisurely, stopping for a moment when a white streak of light brings back to me the world that is no longer mine, I think of the innumerable doors I have never entered, of the innumerable hands I have never caressed, of the innumerable women whose hair I have not unloosed and all the things that could have flashed across my sight, and all the dreams I might have dreamt, and all the secrets I have not discovered, and all the enemies I might have hated, and I weep then for my self-satisfied blindness, for the appalling depth of my inconscience and the briefness of my desires — flashes that illuminate the whole

world and die out in a moment like a breath of wind. . . .

How it stings then, the memory of the things I did not dare to do, the knowledge of the rare moments when I might have achieved something and which will never come again; the roads that opened out unexpectedly like gleaming tracks and closed again without my having seen them; the destinies I was on the point of crossing which were made for me and might have changed everything and which I shall not meet a second time. . . .

And my heart beats so violently that I pause beneath the shadow of an ancient *palazzo* and I seem to be waiting for something to answer my melancholy: the faint chord of a violin, the furious trampling of horses, the refrain of a song, sad as passion itself.

These too, I think, are things that pass and die and are scattered over eternity, rare moments, gestures and impulses we shall never know again, circumstances that are irrevocable; days, hours, minutes that will never come back. And how many things are there that I never saw nor shall ever see again, sounds I never heard nor shall ever hear again, destinies I did not know nor shall ever know again, passions I did

not feel nor shall ever feel again, riddles I did not understand nor shall ever solve. . . .

How many lives lost for a single man! How many forms and aspects lost for a single world! How many possibilities that never became deeds: virtues that never became power: combinations and separations that did not happen even once!

Is the world but a memory of what it might have been? Is my life but a shadow of the one I might have lived?

And in the shadow of the ancient, silent, gloomy *palazzi,* that *are* prisons, my burning hands touch the cold rough stones and I feel the blood rush to my face, and it is not from shame but from a desperate fever — the fever that gives us the love of the impossible.

But when I go up to my tower and, looking out, see the three sister towers, so black against the intense blue of the sky, and in the shadow of my bed, see two shining eyes fixed motionless upon me, I smile again. Yet, should I happen to see myself smiling in a mirror, I cannot repress a shudder of unspeakable fear.

14

Two Images in One Pool

IS it only to see my face in a stagnant pool, full of dead leaves, in a deserted garden, that I have stopped once more after long years in this little capital? As I drew near, I did not think I had any other reason than this.

Coming back from the sea and the great towns on the coast, I felt a longing for hidden things, for narrow paths, for silent rain-blackened walls. I knew I should find all these in the little capital, where, for five years, under masters with classically flowing white beards, I had studied the most Teutonic and hypothetical of sciences.

I often called to mind the dear town, lying so solitary in the midst of its plain, like an exile (I have always thought that there are towns too that are exiled from their own country) — without a river, without a tower or belfrey, almost without trees, but calm and resigned around its

great rococco palace in which the court chatters and drowses. Along the streets, there is a well at every hundred steps and, near the well, a fountain, and on every fountain a terra cotta warrior, painted in faded colours of red and blue.

I remember the house too, where I lived in the years of my scientific novitiate. My windows did not open on to the square but on to a big garden, shut in by houses, where in one corner, there was a pool enclosed by artificial rocks. No one took care of the garden: the old gentleman was dead and his daughter, pious and prosaic, looked upon trees as infidels and flowers as vanity.

The pool too was dead through her fault. No fountain sprang from its bosom. The water was so motionless and drowsy that it seemed it must have been there, always the same, for untold years. Moreover, the fallen leaves from the trees covered it almost entirely, and they too looked as if they had fallen there in the autumns of past centuries.

This garden was the seat of all my joys whilst I lived in the little capital. I had permission to go there at any hour of the day when my masters did not need me; I sat down by the pool with a book and, when I was tired of reading or

the light failed, I tried to see my eyes reflected in the water or counted the dead leaves and, with a thrill of anxiety, followed their slow journeyings at the idle breath of the wind. Sometimes, the leaves scattered or all collected at one end of the pool and then I could see my face in the water and gazed at it so long that I seemed no longer to exist on my own account, in the body, but to be only an image, fixed for all eternity in the pool.

For this reason, I had no sooner reached the little capital than I ran straightway to the garden. Many years had passed, but the town was still the same. Through the same narrow streets, passed the same withered, yellow women with their crumpled caps, and the terra cotta warriors, useless and absurd, leant on their blue swords on the innumerable fountains.

The garden too was as I had left it — even the pool was as I had seen it the last time, before I went back to my own country. A few more weeds in the flower-beds, a few more leaves in the pool, and all the rest was as it had been. I wanted to see my face again in the water, and I realized it was different, very different from that which I remembered so clearly. The charm of the pool and the spot seized me anew. I sat down on one

of the artificial rocks and with my hands stirred the dead leaves to make a larger mirror for my pale, transfigured face.

I had been looking at my image for some minutes and was musing upon the strange laws of time, when I saw, taking form in the water, next to mine, another image. I turned impetuously; a man had sat down next to me and was mirrored next to me in the pool. I looked at him in amazement — I looked at him again and it seemed to me that he resembled me. I turned my eyes once more to the pool and gazed anew at his image reflected on the dark ground. Then in a moment, I realized the truth: *his image was exactly like that which I had reflected seven years before!*

Formerly, perhaps, this would have startled me and I should certainly have cried out like a man caught in the circle of some invincible obsession. But I knew by now that only the impossible sometimes becomes real and so I was not unduly alarmed. I held out my hand to the man, who grasped it, and said to him:

"I know you are myself — a self which passed away some time ago, a self I believed to be dead, which I see again here as I left it, without a visible change. I do not know, oh

my past self, what you want from my present, but whatever you ask, I may not be able to deny you."

The man looked at me with a certain surprise, as if I were new to him, and answered after a moment's hesitation: "I should like to stay with you for a little while. When you thought you had gone away definitely, I stayed on here in this town, where time stands still, without moving, without doing anything, waiting for you. I knew you would come back. You had left the most delicate part of your soul in the water of this pool and from that soul I have lived, up to this day. But now I should like to reunite myself to you, stay close to you, live with you, hearing from you the story of your life during these years. I am as you were then and I know no more of you than you knew then. You can understand my desire to know and to listen. Take me as your companion, until you once more leave this town which lies cast out from the world and time."

I nodded and, hand in hand like two brothers, we went out from the garden.

Then there began for me one of the strangest periods of my life, which was already so different from that of any other man. With myself —

my past self — I lived some days of unexpected joy. My two selves walked through the badly-cobbled streets, in the silence that had reigned for so long in the little capital — a silence that dated from the eighteenth century! — and we talked together without growing weary, seeking to remember the things we had seen, the men we had known, the feelings that moved them, the dreams that left a bitter taste in their soul. Together, the two spirits — the old and the new — sought the university, silent and sepulchral as a mountain monastery — wandered about the French garden behind the rococco palace, where the statues, maimed and blackened, disdained to cast so much as a glance at the endless avenues — and pushed on as far as the *Liliensee,* a shallow pond, that by order of the old princes had been promoted to the title of lake. I cannot think back on these days of walks and intimacy without a momentary pang of regret!

After the first hours of effusive confidences, after the first days spent in reviving old memories, I started to feel an indescribable sense of tedium in listening to my companion. A certain artlessness, a certain lack of sensibility, certain grotesque mannerisms he displayed con-

tinually, displeased me. Besides that, I realized, as I talked with him, that he was full of ridiculous ideas, old-fashioned theories, provincial enthusiasms for things and men I did not even remember. He lent faith to certain words, was touched by certain verses, became excited at certain sights, which on the other hand only inspired me with disgust and ridicule.

His head was still crammed with that common romanticism that is made up of dishevelled hair, enchanted mountains, gloomy forests, storms and battles with rolling of thunder and drums; his heart melted to that Teutonic pathos (of sky-blue flowers, moonlight nights, lovers' tombs, evening rides, etc.) which a century ago nurtured slim, melancholy youths and stoutish yellow-haired maidens.

For some days, I was able to resist my longing to insult him and flee: but one morning, when he had just, with a great flourish, recited a stupidly harrowing *lied,* I felt that my contempt was changing to hatred.

And yet, I thought, this man at whom I am laughing, this ridiculous, ignorant youth, was formerly myself. In some ways, he is still myself. In these long years, I have lived, seen,

guessed, thought, and he has stayed here, alone, untouched, in every way the same I was on the day I left this place. Now, my present despises my past — and yet at that time, even more than to-day, I believed myself to be superior to my fellows, lofty and noble, a universal sage, a budding genius. And I remember that at that time, I despised my past self, my poor little self of an ignorant and simple-minded child. Now I despise the one who despised. And all these despisers and despised have had the same name, the same body, have appeared to men as a single living being. After my present self, another will develop, that will judge my soul of to-day as I to-day judge that of yesterday. Who will have pity on me if I have no pity on myself?

Whilst I was engrossed in these thoughts, my old self went on talking and reciting. I had nothing more to say to him and was silent; he had nothing more to say to me, but, instead of being silent, he coined remarks and recited terribly long pieces of poetry. What had we in common now? Having exhausted our memories of the distant past, I could not talk to him of the near past, of all that makes up my present life, of beautiful things seen, of hearts loved and broken, of paradoxes discussed over the tea-

table, and still less of the sorrowful dream that now fills my whole soul. It was useless to tell him all this; he would not understand me. The sound of certain words which to my mind conjured up a whole scene, the association of ideas of a perfume, a name, a sound, meant nothing to him. He begged me to speak to him and, if I did so, listened to me curiously but without feeling, without understanding, without living that which I was telling him. His eyes gazed vacantly and no sooner was I silent than he started his recitations and sentimental insipidities once more.

There came then a day when I could no longer contain my hatred for this past self of mine. I told him firmly that I could not live with him any more and that I must eschew his company to conquer my aversion. My words surprised and hurt him deeply. His eyes looked at me imploringly; his hand grasped mine.

" Why do you want to leave me? " he said in his hateful theatrical voice, " Why do you want to leave me alone again? For so long, I waited in silence; for so many years, I counted the hours that brought me nearer to these moments! And now that you are with me, that I love you, that we talk of the sweet memories of the past, of

love, of the beauty of the earth and the sorrows of men, you want to leave me alone in this sad, this drearily sad town? "

I replied with a gesture of rage. But when I tried to turn away, I felt his arm press mine convulsively and heard his voice, broken by sobs, say to me:

" No, you must not go away. I will not make you go away. I am so happy to be able to talk now to someone who understands me, whose heart is still aflame, who comes from the towns of the living, who can hear my groans and receive my confessions. You must not, you cannot go away! I will not let you go! "

That time again, I did not answer and stayed with him the whole day without saying a word. He watched me in silence and followed me all the time.

The next day, I made ready to leave, but he stood in front of my door and would not let me go out, until I had promised that I would stay with him that day too.

So four days passed. I tried to get away from him, but he followed me every moment, wearying me with his lamentations and trying to prevent me by force from leaving the town. My hatred and desperation grew from hour to hour.

At last, on the fifth day, seeing that I could not escape from his jealous vigilance, I decided there was only one thing to be done and, resolutely, I left the house, followed by his lamentable shadow.

That day too, we went to the deserted garden, where I had spent so many hours in his form and with his soul, and that day too, we drew near the stagnant pool, full of dead leaves. We sat down on the artificial rocks and pushed aside the leaves with our hands that we might gaze at our images. When our faces appeared side by side in the dark mirror of the water, I turned swiftly, seized my past self by the shoulders and flung him face down into the pool, at the spot where his image had appeared. I pushed his head under the water and held it down with all the force of my mad hatred. He tried to struggle, his legs kicked violently, but his head stayed in the trembling water. After a few moments, I felt his body relax and grow limp. Then I let him go and he fell down to the bottom of the pool. My hateful past self, my ridiculous and stupid self of years ago, was dead for ever.

Quietly I left the garden and the town. No one ever troubled about what had happened. And now I live in the world once more, in the

great towns on the coast, and it seems to me that I lack something I cannot precisely remember. When joy assails me with its stupid laughter, it comes into my mind to think that I am the only man who has killed himself and has gone on living.

15

A Completely Ridiculous Story

FOUR days ago, whilst, in a somewhat irritable frame of mind, I was writing some of the most mendacious pages of my memoirs, I heard someone knocking lightly on the door, but I neither got up nor answered. The taps were too faint and I dislike having anything to do with timid people.

The next day, at the same hour, I heard someone knocking again and this time the taps were louder and more determined. But I did not want to open the door that day either, because I have no liking at all for people who correct their faults too quickly.

The following day, again at the same hour, the knocking was repeated violently and, before I could get up, I saw the door open and there entered a man, of medium height, still young, slightly flushed and with a head of curly

red hair, who bowed awkwardly without saying a word. No sooner had he found a chair than he flung himself into it and, as I was still standing, he pointed to the armchair that I should sit down. Having obeyed him, it seemed to me I had the right to ask him who he was, and I did ask him, somewhat abruptly, to tell me his name and what reason had led him to invade my privacy. But the man did not turn a hair and immediately gave me to understand that for the present, he wished to remain what he was: a stranger.

" The reason that brings me to you," he continued smilingly, " is here in my bag and I will let you know it at once."

I had noticed as a matter of fact that in his hand he held a dirty little yellow leather bag, brass-studded, and this he opened and drew out a book.

" This book," he said, holding up a thick volume bound in old paper with a rust-coloured floral design, " contains an imaginary story, which I have conceived, invented, composed and copied. I have only written this one story in all my life and I take the liberty of believing that it will not displease you. Up to the present, I only know you from hearsay and it is but a few days ago that a woman who loves you told me that

you are one of the few men who are not afraid to know themselves and the only man who has had the courage to counsel death to many like ourselves. For these reasons, I thought of reading you my story which tells the life of an imaginary man to whom the most extraordinary and unusual things happen. When you have listened to it, you will tell me what I ought to do. If you like my story, you will promise to make me famous within a year — if not, you will kill me within a day. Tell me if you accept these conditions and I will begin! "

I saw there was nothing else to be done but to persist in the passive attitude I had adopted up to the present and with a forced smile, which I could not even pretend to make amiable, I declared I would listen to him and do what he wanted.

" Whoever," I thought to myself, " can the woman be who loves me and spoke of me to this man. I never knew there was a woman who loved me. Had I known, I should never have allowed it to happen, for there is no more inconvenient and ridiculous position than that of being an idol. . . ."

But the stranger recalled me from these thoughts by a clear if not exactly eloquent

stamp of his foot. The book was open and he wanted my attention.

The man started to read. His first words escaped me, but to the rest I listened more carefully. Suddenly, I pricked up my ears and felt a little shiver run down my back. A few seconds later, my face was flushed and I was wriggling nervously — a few seconds more and I got up. The stranger paused in his reading and looked at me with humbly inquiring eyes. I gazed at him inquiringly too and almost pleadingly, but I was too stunned to drive him away and simply said like any other self-centred idiot:

" Go on, please."

The extraordinary reading went on. I could not sit still on my chair; the shivers ran not only down my back, but through my head and all over me. If I had but seen my face in a mirror, I might have laughed and everything would have passed, since abject amazement and helpless ferocity must have been painted on it. I tried for a moment not to listen to the words of the perfectly unmoved reader, but that only succeeded in bewildering me the more and so I listened, word for word, *pause for pause,* to the whole story the man read, with his curly head bent over his well-bound book. What should I

or could I do under the unheard-of circumstances? Take the book, tear it to pieces, stamp on it, throw it into the fire? Seize the confounded reader, lash him with my tongue and fling him out of the room like an unwelcome ghost?

But why should I do all that? Yet this reading filled me with inexplicable disgust, gave me the painful impression of an absurd, unpleasant dream with no hope of waking. I thought for a moment I should go mad and had visions of a white-capped nurse slipping me, with infinite and none too gentle precautions, into a strait-jacket.

At last, the reading came to an end. I do not know how many hours it lasted, but I noticed, even in the midst of my bewilderment, that the reader's voice was weak and his forehead bathed in perspiration. At last the book was closed and put back into the bag. The stranger looked at me anxiously, but his eyes were less eager than at first. I was so despondent that even he noticed it and his wonder grew beyond measure when he saw that I was wiping my eyes and did not know what to reply. It seemed to me at that moment that I could never talk again and the simplest things around me suddenly looked so queer and hostile that they almost made me shudder.

All this seems pitiable and shameful enough to me and I have no patience whatsoever with my agitation. But I had very good reason to be thus upset: *The story this man had read was an exact and complete account of my inner and outward life.* During all that time, I had listened to a minute, faithful and pitiless report of everything I had felt, dreamt and done since I came into the world. If some divinity, an invisible witness and reader of the hearts of men, had been near me from my birth and had written down what he had seen of my thoughts and deeds, his story would have been exactly the same as the one the unknown reader declared he had imagined and conceived. All the smallest, most secret details were recorded and not so much as a dream, a passion, a hidden meanness or dishonourable reckoning had escaped the writer. The terrible book even contained events and fleeting thoughts, which I had forgotten or only remembered on hearing again.

My bewilderment and fear arose from this unimpeachable exactness, this disquieting scrupulousness. I had never known this man — this man declared he had never known me. I live very much alone in a town to which no one comes except by chance or necessity and never had I

confided to any friend — even could I have boasted of having one — my adventures as a hunter of frauds, my travels as a pilferer of souls, my ambitions as a volunteer of the improbable. I had never, either for myself or others, written a complete and sincere account of my life and at that very moment, I was putting together some fictitious memoirs to hide myself from men even after my death.

Who then could have told this man everything he related in his hateful rust-coloured book? And he declared he had *made up* the story and presented *me* with *my* life, my whole life, as an *imaginary* story!

I was terribly upset, but of one thing I was certain: that book must not be made public. Even if the incredible and unfortunate author and reader had to die, I could not allow my life to be revealed and made known to all my impersonal enemies the world over.

This decision, which was absolutely firm and clear within me, gave me new courage. The man was still looking at me in dismay and almost pleadingly. It was but two minutes since he had ceased reading and he did not seem to have understood the reason for my distress.

At last I was able to speak.

" Excuse me," I asked him, " you assure me you have really invented this story? "

" Exactly," replied the mysterious reader, somewhat relieved. " For many years, I imagined and thought it over and every now and again, I retouched and changed the life of my hero. It is all, however, my own invention."

These words embarrassed me more than ever, but I succeeded in asking another question:

" Tell me, are you really sure you have not known me before to-day? That you have never heard my life-story from anyone who knows me? "

The stranger could not restrain a smile of surprise at these words.

" I have already told you," he replied, " that until a little while ago, I did not even know your name and it is only a few days ago that they told me you knew how to counsel death. But I knew nothing more about you."

His sentence was passed, but *there must be no delay in executing it.*

" Are you still inclined," I asked him solemnly, " to keep the agreement you yourself made before you started to read? "

" Undoubtedly," he replied in a voice that trembled a little. " I have no other door at which

to knock and this work is my whole life. I feel I could never do anything else."

" I must tell you then," I resumed as solemnly as before, but with a certain touch of sadness, " that your story is stupid, wearisome, incoherent and abominable. Your hero is but a bored scoundrel who would disgust any sensitive reader. I do not want to be too cruel and tell you any more."

I could see the man had not expected these words and I saw with dismay that his eyes closed suddenly. But I realized immediately that his self-control was equal to his honesty. He opened his eyes again and looked at me without fear or hatred.

" Will you come out with me? " he asked in a voice too gentle to be natural.

" Certainly," I said, and, taking up my hat, we went out of the house together without another word. The stranger was still carrying his yellow leather bag and I followed him as in a dream to the bank of the river that was flowing in a noisy, swollen torrent between black stone walls. When he had looked around and made sure there was no would-be life-saver near, he turned to me and said:

" Forgive me if my reading has annoyed you.

I do not think it will happen to me again to trouble any living being. Forget me as soon as you can."

And these were his last words, for, leaping lightly over the barrier, he flung himself with his bag into the stream. I bent forward to try and see him once more, but the water had already closed about and covered him. A timid golden-haired child had seen this rapid suicide, but it did not seem to surprise her and she went on her way eating nuts.

After a few vain attempts to do something, I went home. No sooner was I in my room than I lay down on the bed and fell asleep without an effort, as if worn out and exhausted by the inexplicable.

This morning, I woke up late and with a strange feeling. *It seems to me that I am dead already* and that I am only waiting for them to come and bury me. It seems to me that I already belong to another world and all the things around me have the indescribable air of things that are passed, done with, of no interest to me.

A friend brought me some flowers and I told him he might wait and put them on my tomb. It seemed to me that he smiled, but men always smile when they do not understand.

16

Who Are You?

THE thing started in the simplest way.

One morning, I did not receive a single letter. Such a thing had not happened for many years and I was surprised and annoyed. I thought a great deal of the mail as one of the few possibilities of the unexpected still left in our lives and every day saw me awaiting it anxiously, almost feverishly, when I expected some important reply. If it were only letters from women, far away, asking for a love that was useless to them — or from unknown admirers who sought to draw me into their life — or from forgotten friends who suddenly issued from the past to tell me their desires and regrets in the recent stages of their life — or from provincial discoverers and prophets who would make me accept or refute their follies — or even from insignificant business men or relations in the third

degree — I read all of them with the greatest eagerness. The opening of my daily mail, which at that time was fairly heavy, had become one of my greatest pleasures.

And that morning, I had not a single letter, nor even a newspaper! The impression it made on me was painful but brief. I supposed it was due to chance and that the day after, I should receive even more letters than usual.

To distract my attention, I went out. The city was exactly as it had been the day before. The streets were flanked by the same houses and the usual shops; the same salesmen sold the identical things to undecided customers. The street-signs I was accustomed to see had undergone no change. The carts that rolled by differed in no way from those I had always seen. The men who hurried hither and thither were dressed in the ordinary way. For the first time, I felt a certain sense of imprisonment face to face with the everlastingness of the same things. But immediately I argued that my impression was stupid and, awaking with a start, I could find no reason why I should be abroad at that hour. I decided to go back and, when I had crossed the square to turn into my street, I met an old professor whom I had known since I was

a boy and who often stopped to talk to me about certain of his theories on the artificial multiplication of differences. I raised my hat and bade him good-morning, but the old man continued on his way without noticing me. I put it down to his short-sightedness or again to the fact that he was deep in thought and did not wish to be stopped. So I did not follow him, but went home, rather annoyed at having lost this chance of occupying my mind.

The day had started badly and I decided not to go out again. I consoled myself by dwelling in advance on the pleasure I should derive from the innumerable letters that might reach me in the morning. I passed a less peaceful night than usual, but morning came at last. I awaited the hour of the mail with ridiculous impatience. I spent nearly half an hour at the window watching for the postman. Finally he came, but *not that morning either were there any letters for me!* This prolonged silence on the part of my correspondents upset me terribly. I spent the whole day inventing pretexts, excuses, hypotheses, to belittle and explain the fact that to me was of the gravest importance. Once more I hoped for the day after. And the next morning came and, for the third time, there was not a

single letter for me! Then I could bear it no longer. I went down to the street; I called the postman — who pretended not to recognize me — and made him search through his bag to the very bottom to make sure there was really nothing for me. Then a very strange thought came into my mind: that there was a sort of conspiracy against me to separate me from my friends and that some postal clerk was amongst the accomplices. I had not the faintest idea as to the reason of this conspiracy, but what was happening to me was so strange that I was obviously driven to still stranger surmises. So I went to the General Post-Office, spoke to the Postmaster, had enquiries instituted, yet nothing was found. No one appeared to know me and everyone was amazed at my suspicions.

I came out of the Post-Office in a state of depression almost bordering on humiliation and started to wander aimlessly about the city, racking my brains to understand the reason of this strange and unexpected silence that had grown up around me. Walking along, I met a friend with whom I had gladly frittered away certain winter evenings, when the fog was so thick that even the face of a fool was comforting. I stopped, smiling, but he avoided me and, having

looked at me in wonder, passed on, hastening his steps.

"Have you gone mad?" I shouted angrily. "Why do you not want to speak to me?"

He did not answer nor even turn round. He was one of those cheerful idiots who are called practical jokers, and some of his tricks were famous. So I supposed he was trying to make fun of me by pretending he did not know me, and I resumed my way without paying any attention to him.

But, continuing to debate in my mind the reason of this general silence, I could not help thinking too of the people who had not wanted to recognize me. I suspected there might be some connection between the two facts, but looking at it in that way, the matter became more puzzling still and I preferred to believe in an extraordinary series of coincidences.

I returned home and wrote a number of letters, asking anything at random, just in order to obtain a reply, or demanding to know the reason of the silence of those who should have written to me during that time. When I had posted them, I felt more at rest and it seemed to me impossible that letters should not start arriving again. However, I should have to wait at

least two days and I thought — in order to escape from my obsession — of spending them entirely in completing certain historical researches I should have made some time ago on the disappearance of the famous city of Semifonte.

So, in a less trying way than the others, these two days passed too, but on the third day, I received nothing and, almost in despair, I thought of asking the advice of one of my dearest friends, a student of physics, who played the violin divinely. I went to him straight away. They told me he was at home and showed me into his study. He came in a few moments later. However, instead of shaking hands, smiling and asking me how I was, he stopped short and asked:

" Whom have I the honour of addressing? "

The impression these simple words made on me was terrible. In an instant, I remembered everything that had gone before and an awful suspicion crossed my mind. But I still had the strength to resist it. Once more, I wanted to believe it was a joke and said, forcing a smile:

" Are you mad this morning? Why do you pretend not to know me? Don't be an idiot, and offer me a cigarette."

My words had the opposite effect from what I expected. My friend's face grew more serious

still and I saw that he instinctively put his hand to the pocket where he generally carried his revolver.

" I tell you," he said in a resolute voice, " that I do not know you and I do not know what you are talking about. Kindly tell me who you are or go away."

In the face of such coolness, I went mad. I started to implore him, to repeat my name to him a hundred times, to call to his memory a thousand things we had seen together, to ask what I had done to him, for what reason he was pretending not to know me, and, faced with the stubbornness of his denials, I started to curse him abominably. But he quickly grew tired of the scene.

" You must be drunk or mad," he said to me harshly. " I shall avoid sending for the police, in order not to have any trouble, but I must beg you to go immediately." He pushed me out of the room, grasped me firmly by the arm and shut me out of the house. I was not as strong as he and at the same time so bewildered, so distressed, so dazed, that I did not even make an attempt to resist.

Drearily I dragged myself home. No sooner had I reached my room than I ran to the mirror

to see if my face had changed, whether I suddenly looked different. I scrutinized myself closely but the only change I could discover was that caused by the sadness of those days.

I flung myself on a couch, longing only to fall asleep and feel myself lose consciousness. But I did not succeed in even closing an eye.

A fixed idea had taken possession of me: *I must, without being aware of it, have committed some loathsome crime and no one wanted to know me.* But however much I racked my brains, I could not imagine what that crime might be. At that time, I was living a perfectly virtuous life. I did not gamble, I had no connections with women, I borrowed money from no one. My only vices were my immoderate love of cafés and of Indian philosophy. As far as I knew, I had not murdered anyone nor robbed a house.

And yet something must have happened from the moment when everyone avoided me, pretended not to know me, nor even dared to write to me. This feeling of a circle of loneliness they were trying to create around me made me tremble. I was about to be cut off from the society of the living. They were seeking to crush me with silence: to make of me, socially, something that did not exist, a dead man.

But I wanted at all costs to get rid of this painful uncertainty. I wanted to know the reason why all of them wanted to cast me out of their lives.

In the evening, having gathered courage from a few drops of brandy, I went to the café where many of my friends gathered together to discuss the usual foolish trifles of the day. I went straight to the table where some of them were sitting. They looked at one another rather foolishly and did not answer my greeting. By now, I was used to this comedy, so it did not upset me:

" I see," I said to them quietly, " that you too, like the rest, are pretending not to know me. I have come here precisely to know the reason for your extraordinary behaviour. I must have committed some very grave crime if even my oldest friends drive me from their house, but I tell you frankly I have no idea of the accusations against me. Tell me what I have done. It is the last proof of friendship I ask you. Whatever you may tell me, I will not bother you any more with my presence nor my talk."

Before I had finished speaking, I noticed that the amazement of my companions had grown beyond words. One of them started to laugh; an-

to see if my face had changed, whether I suddenly looked different. I scrutinized myself closely but the only change I could discover was that caused by the sadness of those days.

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Before I had finished speaking, I noticed that the amazement of my companions had grown beyond words. One of them started to laugh; an-

other — more discreet — got up and went to another table. I awaited their reply with such anxiety that I could scarcely breathe. At last, one of them said to me abruptly:

"Pardon me, but who are you?"

"Do not go on, I beg you," I resumed in a trembling voice; "drop your parts for a moment. Tell me in God's name what I have done, why you treat me like this. Tell me . . ."

But I could not go on. They all burst out laughing. As soon as their laughter had died down, they called the waiter and rose to go. One of them, a good fellow, who had been very fond of me, came up to me and said beneath his breath:

"Do you want me to come home with you?"

I accepted his offer and we went out together. I hoped I could have at least persuaded him to tell me something, but all in vain. He answered me very gently as one would an invalid or a madman, but up to the last minute, he would not confess that he knew me.

"You may rest assured," he told me again, "that you have committed no crime or at least none of us know anything of it. It is an idea you have put into your head and it will pass. I assure you that neither I nor the others know you

and that we were not pretending when we asked you who you were. Try to calm yourself and, if you really care to be my friend, I will come to see you sometimes."

When we reached my door, he left me with many good wishes and advised me to go to sleep. I went up to my little room and undressed without even being aware of it. But I could not sleep. My position was so horrible that I could not yet believe it was true. To feel yourself completely alone in the world, suddenly abandoned by everyone, under the weight of some unknown shame or silent condemnation, is more terrifying and mysterious than death itself. I no longer existed for men. I was alone and accursed, I was the same yet all the others had changed in respect to me. I was alone, but not on an island nor a raft, like Robinson Crusoe or some shipwrecked mariner, with a hope of being saved and the vision of a safe return, but alone in the midst of a great city, alone in the midst of a crowd, alone in the midst of men who repulsed me, denied me, cut me off from their life.

Towards morning, I fell asleep and started to dream so terribly that I woke up screaming and weeping with horror. I do not know how I had the strength to go out of the house once more.

The city was still the same; everything was as it had been in the past. Men and women passed by, and every now and again, as if to annoy me, men and women I knew, and not one of them smiled at me, not one of them greeted me. I was like a stranger who had arrived for the first time that day. Everything that referred to me had disappeared from their memories. I no longer existed in others, but only in myself. It seemed to me that my very soul had been cut off, that only a fragment was left, a little nucleus, to which I could give the name of *I*. It appeared to me that everyone was asking me the reason for my existence. On all sides, I seemed to hear hasty, wondering voices asking me: " Who are you? Who may you be? "

The only difference lay in the way of asking, but everyone who passed threw the same cruel question in my face.

Then all those questions fused themselves together in a chorus and became one single overwhelming question, a question which I asked myself: " *Who are you?* " When had I ever tried to answer that question? When had it ever come into my mind to confess to myself who I was? I knew my name, my age, my country, my stature — my face I knew a little, my soul still less. Of

the future, I could say nothing; of the past, there remained but a few dim, confused memories. I had never sought to discover myself, I had never tried to know my own secret, to make sure what was my true name, the name of my race, and not the fictitious and absurd one my father had given me at my christening.

" *Who are you?* " I asked myself at last and no sooner had I felt the gravity and magnitude of this question than all the rest disappeared. I no longer remembered either the insults, the laughter or the desertion of the others. Separated from them, I stood face to face with myself and I wanted to forget everything that the habits and opinions of others had done to my soul. Up to that moment, I had lived to a certain extent because others guided and advised me, because they had formed certain ideas about me that I did not want to belie, because I had found myself in the midst of men whose tastes, without being aware of it, I had imitated and whose values I had adopted. Now that the others denied me and declared they did not know me, I denied what there was of them in myself, I refused to recognize as mine what they had imposed upon me. And without fear, I now asked myself: " *Who are you?* "

All the other voices had grown silent. My question alone filled my soul. And for many days, I lived as in a dream, laboriously seeking a convincing reply.

One night, whilst I was dreaming of a bevy of blind men wandering through a grassy meadow, the reply came to me suddenly and unawares.

I am one for whom the others do not exist.

This blindness and forgetfulness on the part of men towards me was a trial that I could not have overcome in any other way. Men no longer knew me but I had not been crushed. I had found myself again, and now I could start my life once more and know other men without trembling.

In the morning, when I awoke, I felt as happy as a convalescent child. A strange surprise awaited me. The postman brought me a big packet of mail, in which I found everything I had been expecting since the first morning of silence. That evening, at the café, my friends welcomed me as usual and did not make the slightest allusion to the incident that had occurred a few nights before. The student of physics, who had driven me out of his house, was amongst them too and more amiable than ever. I soon tired of their company and left them. Outside I found other people who greeted me as

they had always done and spoke to me with their accustomed cordiality. I had entered the world once more. Men accepted me again, yet I was strangely tired of their company; it seemed to me as if I had returned from some distant country and had lost the taste for everything I saw.

Never, since that time, have I been able to explain the reason for that pause in my life, during which everyone had looked on me as an unknown madman. I sometimes think there must be voids in time and that I alone lived during those days, as in an interval, whilst the others were not aware of it. But why did they seem to be living, as they always live, as they are living to-day? That zone of mystery, that interval in my commonplace life, has always worried me and worries me still more whilst I am writing this story. Even now at midnight, when I am writing in a silence charged with the breathing and heartbeats of others, it seems to me I am alone, hopelessly alone, in the midst of men, in the midst of the world: a soul apart in the centre of the universe. And indeed . . .

17

The Day That Was Not Redeemed

I KNOW many old and beautiful princesses, but they are of those who are so poor that they have barely one little waiting-maid dressed in black, and are obliged to live in some tumbled-down Tuscan villa, one of those hidden villas where two dusty cypress trees stand sentinel over a walled lattice.

If you meet one of them in the *salon* of some widowed countess, long out of fashion, call her Your Highness and speak to her in French, in that international, classic, colourless French you may learn from the Moral Tales of the Abbé Marmontel — the French, in a word, of people of quality. My princesses will almost always answer with a charming loquaciousness and, when you have succeeded in penetrating into their poor minds — so flimsy and full of dust and fripperies, like the oratories of the seven-

teenth century — you will realize that even life may be bearable and that our mothers were not so foolish as it might seem when they brought us into the world.

What strange secrets my beautiful old princesses have murmured into my ears! They love powder but, even more, they love conversation, and as all of them are German — (only one is Russian and that by chance) — their delicious antiquated French sometimes affects me in the most extraordinary way: at such moments, my heart grows tender and it almost — I confess — comes into my mind to sigh like some love-sick swain.

One evening, not too late, in the *salon* of a Tuscan villa, seated in an armchair of the Empire period, next to a table where I had been offered a very weak cup of tea, I communed in silence with the oldest and most beautiful of my princesses.

She was dressed in black; a black veil covered her face, and her hair, which I knew to be white and wavy, was hidden beneath a black hat. Around her there seemed to be a halo of darkness. This gave me a sense of restfulness and I tried to believe that this woman was only a shade I had evoked by an effort of the will. It

was not difficult, since the room was almost dark and the single lighted candle shone dimly on her powdered face alone. Everything else mingled with the gloom in such a way that I could imagine I only had a head in front of me, a face detached from its body and suspended about a yard from the ground.

But the Princess started to talk and, for the moment, dispelled my web of fancies.

"*Ecoutez donc, monsieur,*" she said, "*ce qui m'arriva il y a quarante ans quand j'étais encore assez jeune pour avoir le droit de paraître folle.*" And in her faint sweet voice, she went on telling me one of her innumerable love-stories: a French general had turned actor for love of her and had been murdered one night by a drunken clown.

But I already knew that particular kind of story and wanted something stranger, more far-fetched, more improbable. The Princess was anxious to gratify me to the utmost:

"You oblige me," she said, "to tell the last secret I have left and which has always remained a secret for the very reason that it is more improbable than all the rest. But I know that I must die within a few months, before the end of the winter, and I am not sure I shall find

another man who, like you, is interested in absurdities. . . .

"This secret began when I was twenty-two years old. At that time I was the most charming young princess in Vienna and had not yet killed my first husband. That happened two years later when I fell in love with. . . . But you already know the story. *Passons!* — It happened then that at the end of my twenty-second year, I received a visit from a distinguished-looking old gentleman, who asked whether he might speak to me in private for a few minutes. No sooner were we alone than he said: 'I have a daughter whom I adore and who is very ill. I must give her life and strength and, for that reason, I am seeking to buy or hire some years of youth. If you will give me one of your years, I will give it back to you little by little, day by day, before the end of your life. When you have completed your twenty-second year, instead of passing to your twenty-third, you will find yourself a year older and will enter your twenty-fourth. You are still very young and will scarcely notice the jump, but I will pay you back the three hundred and sixty-five days to the very last, two or three at a time, and when you are old, you can at will have hours of real youth,

unexpected returns of health and beauty. Do not think you are talking to a practical joker or a demon. I am only a poor father who has prayed so earnestly to God that it has been granted him to give what to others is impossible. With great labour, I have already collected three years, but I need many more. Give me one of yours and you will never regret it!"

"Even before that time, I had been used to strange adventures and, in the almost imperial world in which I lived, nothing was considered impossible. So that I consented to give this strange loan and, a few days later, grew a year older. Practically no one noticed it and, until I was forty, I lived my life gaily and without resorting to the year I had given on deposit and which was to be paid back to me.

"The old gentleman had left me his address, together with the contract, and had begged me to let him know at least a month in advance when I wanted a day or week of youth, promising that I should receive what I asked for at the appointed time.

"After my fortieth year, when my beauty started to fade, I retired to one of the few castles that still remain in my family and only went to Vienna two or three times a year. In good time,

I wrote to my debtor and then I went to the court balls and social gatherings in the capital, young and beautiful as I had been when I was twenty-three, to the great marvel of those who had seen my beauty fading. How strange were the nights before my reappearances! I fell asleep tired and faded as I was and, in the morning, I awoke gay and light-hearted as a bird that has just learnt to fly, and ran to my mirror. Every wrinkle had disappeared, my body was fresh and soft, my hair golden once more and my lips red, so red that I myself could have kissed them madly. In Vienna, adorers flocked around me, cried out in wonder, accused me of witchcraft and, at the bottom of it all, could not understand it. As soon as the time of youth I had asked for was about to run out, I stepped into my carriage and in all haste returned to the castle where I refused to receive anyone. Once only, a young Bohemian count, who had fallen madly in love with me during one of my stays in Vienna, succeeded, I do not know how, in penetrating into my apartment, and nearly fainted with amazement, seeing how closely I *resembled* his flame, but how old and ugly was she who had intoxicated him on the streets of Vienna.

" No one after that succeeded in violating my voluntary seclusion, broken only by the strange joy and deep melancholy of these rare pauses in the pitiful course of my rapid decline. Can you succeed in imagining this fantastic life of long months of lonely old age, broken now and again by the fugitive fires of a few days of love and passion?

" At first, those three hundred and sixty-five days seemed to me inexhaustible and I could not believe they would ever end. So that I was too lavish with my reserve and wrote too often to the mysterious Debtor of Life. But he is a terribly exact man. I went to him one day and saw his account-books. I am not the only person with whom he has made contracts of this kind and I know he marks the diminuation of his returns with the most scrupulous accuracy. I saw his daughter too, deathly-pale, sitting on a terrace full of flowers.

" I have never been able to discover whence he draws the life which he gives back so punctually, at the rate of days, but I have reason to believe that he resorts to *new debts*. Who may the women have been who gave him the days he renders to me? I should like to know some of them, but, though I have often asked him

shrewd questions, I have never had the luck to discover who they were. *Mais, peut-être, elles ne seraient pas si étranges que je crois. . . .*

" In any case, this man is exceedingly interesting and succeeds perfectly in his reckoning. You cannot imagine how terrible my life became when he announced to me as calmly as a banker that he had henceforth only eleven days at my disposal. All that year I did not write to him and I was tempted for a moment to give them to him and not torment myself any more. You can understand the reason? Every time I became young again, the moment of awakening was more painful since the difference between my ordinary state and my being twenty-three grew greater and greater as the years passed.

" On the other hand, it was impossible for me to resist. How can you imagine that a poor, lonely old woman can refuse, now and again, one or two or three days of beauty and love, of grace and happiness? To be loved for a day, desired for an hour, happy for a moment! *Vous êtes trop jeune pour comprendre tout mon ravissement!*

" But the days are about to end — my credit is about to be closed for ever. Think: *I have only one more day to ask!* After that day, I shall be definitely old and consecrated to death. One

more day of light and then darkness for ever! Consider, I beg you, all the unforeseen tragicness of my life. Before I ask for that day. . . .

" But when shall I ask for it? What shall I do with it? For more than three years I have not been young any more and in Vienna scarcely anyone remembers me and my beauty would seem ghostly. And yet I feel the need of a lover, passionate and unscrupulous. Once more I must feel my body covered with caresses. Once more, my wrinkled face must be fresh and rosy and my lips, for the last time, know the meaning of passion. Poor pale cracked lips! They yearn to be red and warm one more day, a single day, for a last lover, a last kiss!

" But I cannot make up my mind. I have not the strength to spend the last little coin of true life I have left and I do not know how to spend it and have a mad longing to spend it. . . ."

Poor dear Princess! She had already raised her veil some time ago and the tears traced narrow furrows on the powder of her face. At that moment, her sobs, though repressed by good breeding, prevented her from continuing. Then I felt a great longing, at all costs, to comfort her charming old age and I fell at her feet — at the feet of a wrinkled old princess dressed

in black — and told her that I would have loved her more than any mad nobleman, and begged her, in the most caressing words, to grant me, to me alone, the last day of her beautiful youth.

I do not exactly remember everything I said to her, but my words must have moved her, since she promised, in a few rather theatrical phrases, that, within a month, for a single day, I should be her last lover. She arranged we should meet on a certain day in the same villa and, in an agitated frame of mind, I took my leave, after having kissed her frail white hands.

On my way back to the city that night, the moon, that was almost full, looked at me insistently with an air of ironic pity, but I was too busy thinking of my princess to take it seriously.

That month was very long, the longest in my life. I had promised my future mistress that I would not try to see her again until the appointed day and I kept my gallant pledge. In spite of all, the day came and was the longest of that long month. But at length the evening arrived and, having dressed with great care, I set out with a trembling heart and uncertain step towards the villa.

From afar, I saw the windows lit up as they

had never been before and, drawing nearer, found the lattice open and the balcony laden with masses of flowers. I entered the house and passed into the *salon,* where all the lights of two elaborate chandeliers were blazing.

They told me to wait and I waited. No one came. The whole house was silent; the lights burnt and the flowers filled the solitude with their fragrance. After a restless hour of waiting, I could bear it no longer and went into the dining-room. The table was elaborately set for two with flowers and fruit in profusion. I passed on into a little boudoir, dimly lit and deserted. At last, I reached a door which I knew to be that of the Princess' own room. I knocked two or three times, but there was no reply. Then, summoning up my courage, for a lover may well forget etiquette, I opened the door, stopping on the threshold.

The room was strewn with sumptuous dresses thrown about at random, as if the place had been sacked. Four candelabra spread a bright, flickering light. The Princess was lying in an armchair in front of the mirror, dressed in one of the most gorgeous dresses I have ever seen.

I called her, but she did not answer.

I drew near and touched her, but she did not

move. I realized then that her face was as I had always seen it, pinched and white, a little sadder than usual and a little more afraid. I put my hand on her mouth but felt no breath — I put it against her heart but felt no beating.

The poor Princess was dead — she had died suddenly and peacefully whilst awaiting in front of her mirror the return of her beauty.

A letter I found on the ground next to her gave me the key to the mystery of her sudden end.

It contained but a few lines in a firm military hand and said:

Dear Princess,

I am sincerely grieved not to be able to give you back immediately the last day of youth I owe you. I can no longer find women intelligent enough to believe my incredible promise and my daughter is in danger.

I shall try again and will let you know the result, since it is my ardent desire to give you satisfaction to the very last.

Believe me, dear Princess,

Yours most devotedly. . . .

The signature was illegible.

18

The Mute

THERE has come to our town a strange master. He is called Ariel and comes from an island, one of those islands that no geographer describes, but that now and again rise from the sea at the call of a poet. They say that a long time ago, Ariel was in the service of a prince in exile and that from him, he heard some of those things which may not be heard more than once. Perhaps it is for this reason that he has the apparently strange habit of allowing no man to hear his lectures a second time. He welcomes as an auditor whosoever may come, provided that he has never been before. If the same man comes back, he has him driven away and no one can boast of having heard him speak twice.

" To-day," I thought to myself, " he will certainly say some wonderful new thing, since all those who come out from his house and pass on

through the streets look thoughtful and inspired, as if they had been present at some divine birth. But to-morrow, it may be, he will say something more extraordinary still. However, if I go to-morrow, I cannot hear him on the day on which he will reveal the most unexpected and tremendous doctrine of all. It is not a question of an ordinary master, whom you can hear as often as you wish and follow for whole years together. Each one of his listeners runs a new kind of risk and the remorse of the unknown is incurable."

For many days then, I did not go to hear the words of Ariel. I passed many hours at his door, undecided, trembling, anxious and afraid at the same time. When the day's students came out from his house, I asked them what the master had said, but they gave me no answer. They looked at me in bewilderment and passed on with slow and uncertain steps, as if they were surprised to still find themselves in our town, made up of houses so solidly wedged into the ground.

For many days I was in this state, unable to live my ordinary life, paying no attention to my books, forgetting to kiss my mother in the morning and at night, forgetting even to watch the

first stars come out. But I could not resist for long and finally I too threw my dice.

Yesterday morning, with many other men who were waiting at his door, I entered Ariel's school. He was in a big room, bare and simple, from the windows of which you look out on rows of columns. He was standing with his back to a wall and, although it is summer, he was wrapped in a cloak. I think he wore it to hide his wings, since his eyes seemed ever to be gazing upwards and beyond the hills, eyes that were fixed, cold, serene, starry.

No sooner had we all come in than he looked at us one by one and drove away two youths, brothers, who had been there once before. They had tried to hide amongst the rest, but it seems that his gift for recognizing faces is miraculous. As soon as the two had gone, he closed the door and for some minutes remained silent.

All of us were standing like he. There was not a sound in the room but that of our tense breathing.

Suddenly, Ariel started to speak in a loud, clear voice:

"I am going to speak to-day of man and his great misery. None of you know what this great misery is. How many have pitied, admonished or

cursed you! Some have described all your hidden sorrows in their books and others have despised you so deeply they could not even weep. From your misery have been born the elegies of poets, the despair of anchorites, the teachings of saints, the theories of suicides, and yet no one has known your great, overwhelming, supreme misery.

"Are you unhappy because you must die? But everything in this world dies and is born again. Are you unhappy because your joys are brief and your sorrows eternal? But sorrow saves you from satiety, keeps you pure, raises you to self-knowledge. Are you unhappy because you cannot do everything? You would be more unhappy still if everything were within your power.

"It is not in this that your real unhappiness lies. Your misery is another and no one up to this day has told you what it is. And I can tell you and am going to tell you.

"*Men are mute!* That is their great, overwhelming, sole misery. Men are mute, they do not know how to talk, they do not know how to answer. If men had but spoken, this world would have ceased to exist and they would suffer no longer. But up to the present, they have been mute; stubbornly, stupidly mute, and only be-

cause of this does their present life and eternal misery continue.

" You do not understand my words, I know. I can see the doubt in your hearts and the shadow of a smile on your lips. Yet you will not be able to smile when once you have understood what I wish to say to you.

" I know that many of you find this earth too uniform, wearisome, full of customs and habits, drearily monotonous. I can see amongst you one pale youth, dressed in black, a reader of the complete works of Byron, predestined to suicide and who certainly more than once, to himself and to others, has given way to similar lamentations. Always the sun that shines, water that runs, the moon that appears and disappears, the birds that sing, women who love, flowers that burst into bloom and then fade, men who cheat one another, bells that ring from dawn to dusk, ships that weigh anchor and then return to port, days that follow nights, and all this for ever, for your whole life, from the day of your first moans to that of your last. Even circling the globe, knowing new men and seeking new sensations, you end by discovering on every hand the universal constancy of things, the tedious uniformity of acts, poorly masked

beneath varying names, the fundamental unity of this brief little animal existence of ours; every year brings the same seasons and the same changes of sun and wind, of heat and storms; every man's life can be told in a few words, always the same: he is born, he suffers, he loves, he hopes, he dies.

" So speak the men who are no longer children and who will not let themselves be intoxicated by the dangerous games of life. But they have not yet understood their great misery. They believe they have drained the cup of bitterness to the dregs and instead they have barely touched the brim and have drawn back, thirsting to suppress life, the earth and themselves.

" But who will teach them the road to the end if they have not even understood the meaning of the earth and the profound reason of its monotony?

" The earth is monotonous, the earth is always uniform, the earth repeats itself. That is all perfectly true and all has its reason. The earth must and does repeat itself and the fault is man's — man who is mute and does not know how to answer.

" Know then once and for all — my scholars of to-day — that the *earth is but a discourse,* a

long complicated discourse, stupendous, obscure, worldly, which awaits a reply. There is someone who wants to say something to man and he does not speak the language of men. He speaks by symbols, by means of things, of deeds, of events. The universe is his discourse, it is his word made flesh, made earth, made plant, made sun — it is his mysterious word that from century to century descends from heaven to earth and not one of you listens to nor understands it. And it is for this — and for no other reason — that this discourse is repeated and says the same things for each life, the very same eternal things! The earth is monotonous because it is a discourse that is perpetually repeated and not one of you knows how to reply, because you are all mute.

"You look at the earth, copy it, describe it, use it for the necessities of life, but not once do you think of *listening to it*. It never enters your mind that the world is talking to you, that it is saying something to you, that it is awaiting some answer from you! You look upon the earth as a store-house or a farm, as a house of sorrow or joy, but you have never thought that perhaps the earth is a voice, a voice that insistently repeats certain questions, a voice turned to your

ears, to your soul; a voice that is desperate and tired, that begs and implores you for an answer. Why do you suppose the nightingales always pour out their hearts in the same trills, the tree-frogs croak in the same harrowing rhythm, the wind has the same, deep soughing, the water the same clear voice? For what reason do you suppose the swallows in their flight trace innumerable circles and hieroglyphics in the air? For what reason do you suppose the sun passes slowly over our heads each day, following the same path? For what reason do you suppose the stars every evening form their constellations in the skies, those starry ciphers that speak of infinity? For what reason do you suppose the trees grow green again every spring and try to tell us the same divine truth with their flowers of unchanging colour?

"Everything that appears, everything that reappears, forms part of the same discourse. The return of things is the repetition of identical words and phrases. He who speaks to you is very patient. He is not discouraged by your silence. To infinity, he repeats his questions — that is to say the universe — and he does not despair that one day you will answer him. When you have answered him, the actual world will im-

mediately cease to exist and, with it, your life. Then a new discourse will begin — a new earth and a new heaven will be created by the word and the marvellous dialogue between man and God will go on without a pause. Now it is your turn to speak. For thousands and thousands of years, the voice has spoken and you have been mute. From to-day onwards, strive to understand the earth as a series of words. Strain your ears, fix your mind, rise to this obscure language. When you cease to be mute, your great misery will be but a memory and a new page of the universe will be turned. I have given you fear — for yourselves, create hope."

This is all I remember of Ariel's discourse. But who can repeat his words one by one, as they came, overpowering and terrible, from his lips. Not one of us had the courage to look at him or speak to him after he was silent. And we found ourselves once more in the street, thoughtful and bewildered, as if we had been present at some divine birth.

On the way, a man stopped me and asked me, trembling, what the master had said that day.

I looked at him blindly and passed on without a word.

19

The Clock That Stopped at Seven

THERE is, in a corner of my room, an old clock that stopped many years ago and points to the hour of seven. All the other clocks in the house and the town strike and chime, give warning and live, but the old clock in my room, with its white dial in the black case, is fixed and motionless — faithful to the last hour to which it points. But every twelve hours, there is a moment in which the poor clock in my room seems to me to awaken and live with the rest, in harmony with the world around it. When all the fingers point to seven and the shrill or silvery chimes of the grandfather-clocks are heard seven times and the cuckoos spring out and repeat their melancholy cry of little mechanical imprisoned beasts seven times, then my old clock too pretends to join gravely in the solemn passage of time. Twice a day, in two lightning

flashes, this dead piece of machinery joins in the life around it, this old fixture seems to move once more. To those who chanced to look at it in those two moments only and then no more, *the motionless clock would be telling the truth.*

But no sooner have the other fingers passed the hour, no sooner has the striking of the clocks died away in a mist of tremulous harmony, no sooner have the pathetic cuckoos gone back into their little wooden houses than I realize that the poor clock in my room is dead in very truth and that the example and shrills and cries of all its brethren have been unable to wake it.

And it is for this very reason that I love the tired clock that points unchangingly to seven. I like the choice of the last hour it made many years ago and the unruffled faithfulness of its sleep. And I like and love it all the more since I see in it *perforce* my own reflection, a mirror of myself, another me. Its fate is almost my own and my life is rather like its death.

How do I come to confess my fears so readily? Yet how could I do otherwise? Would not He — who appears to us under so many guises — have realized by Himself that my existence is made up of periods of silence, of sleep and of death,

interrupted by swift spells and starts of apparent life?

I too am like the poor clock that for so many years has stood motionless in its corner. Most of the time, my life is empty, commonplace, full of unspoken gloom and foolish joys, of domestic plans and silly fancies, like those of the poorest soul amongst you. Almost always, I am a man like other men, I belong to my kind, I feel myself to be a son of this earth and I let myself be dragged into this sluggish channel of mechanical actions and hackneyed words that you and I call life.

But I know that this is not all there is in the world, that not in this poor shape alone does existence manifest itself. In this world there are — I am perfectly sure of it — sweet voices that speak without troubling to be listened to, and great hearts that beat and beat mightily like divine blacksmiths in the bowels of the earth, and blood that throbs swiftly as a torrent and exuberantly as a great stream. And there are in the world colossal harmonies made of the wind and the sea, and sublime choruses of the high swaying trees that sigh and sing the whole nights long for unknown festivals.

But you and I do not hear them: all this joyous

clamour of the universe does not seem made for us. In this forge of harmony, we crouch, deaf and listless, in the darkest corners.

Yet I am not always condemned to deafness and quiescence. There come moments in which my soul becomes a part of this great world and hears and repeats its beating, its sounds and voices. These moments come but rarely, but they come with the regularity of a celestial conjunction.

It seems to me then that the line of my life cuts and crosses the line of another world and that I have to leap across a river of light to return to darkness. But in these brief, fleeting moments, I live more deeply than in all the time between one crossing and the next; I feel words rise to my lips that I have never spoken before, passions burn in my heart that I never knew and sudden forces uplift my soul that I did not understand, I hear the replies whispered in my ears to questions I do not remember having asked. In each of these moments, I see myself in the midst of the universe like a shepherd standing on a mountain above all his pastures, and nothing is hidden from me nor silent, neither the frank confession of things nor the tender secrets of hearts. And I feel so great, so alone!

Serene, uplifted, breathing freely, in perfect gladness, in contact with all things, in communion with God. I win back my simple joy in the elements, in things loved and forgotten: in pure air, cold water, good bread, fresh grass and caressing breezes. And in those moments, it is no longer I who speak, but someone who speaks aloud within me, and a spring seems to rise in my heart and flow down, with even tenor, to quench the thirst of those who wait by the wayside.

I feel and enjoy, at that moment, the fleeting happiness of being in *harmony with the universe*. In that instant, I am in time and harmony with all things — my heart beats to their beat, I breathe with their breath, walk with their step, speak with their voice, live their very life. But the world, when that moment has passed, goes on moving and living and beating and singing and I remain what I was before and fall once more into my sleep, my silence, my death, into the life of men, waiting, without knowing it, for another fleeting instant to return.

If I were like you, poor old clock in my room, made only of springs and rusty wheels of steel, shut in a black case, this useless melancholy would not come over me when I think of the

mournful rhythm of my life. But I, oh silent clock, am made of hot blood and restless nerves and desires that are not even satisfied with the impossible.

Why suffer the long nights of darkness for a moment of light, the eternal days of silence and solitude for a note of song in harmony with the universe? Why can I not live all the time, every moment, without rest or waiting? Why can I not accompany all things in the solemn cycles of life, instead of awaiting the point at which they, for a fleeting moment, cross my despairing immobility?

Stop laughing then for a moment, you sleek and prudish gentlemen, who will listen neither to ravings nor to truth. Do you perhaps believe you are living all the time? You too, I believe, only live when your petty existence coincides, *in your own hour,* with the life of the universe. The rest of the time is but inconscient expectation. Every man has *his own hour* and those, who do not know or await it, smile and laugh as you are doing now.

Beat on, clocks of the city; beat on, hearts of men! Beat gaily together in chorus. Recite dutifully, men and women, I pray you, the farce of life and do not forget to accompany it with the

gavotte of sentiment. But remember the bitter, hateful truth, that your life has stopped, perhaps for ever!

Happy are you, sane and level-headed men, who are satisfied with the slow movement of your hearts and the inexorable tic-tac of your existence. You are sure of living and you look complacently on the everlasting harmony of your immobility. But I, who suffer all the humiliation of knowing myself dead, dead and shut up in this coffin of stones and bricks that is my room, and who only from time to time for a fleeting moment cross the sphere of flame, I do not want to pay so many hours of silence for the eloquence of a minute, so many endless days of stupidity for the genius of an instant.

I know, old clock in my room, that you wait patiently and crave for no other moment of life or harmony than the hour of seven. And now your moment is drawing near again. In a little while, the tower-clocks will chime out and, seven times, the invisible hammers will strike the little hidden bells. And when silence has returned once more, you will still calmly and faithfully point to the same hour for all eternity, whilst all the other erratic fingers will go on tracing their useless circles.

But my moment, that divine flash that cannot be held fast, has passed already. Whilst I was writing these mournful pages next to you, I felt, for a second or two, all that you know. And now everything has disappeared and vanished away and I see and hear only what everyone else sees and hears. I am rather tired, but perfectly calm, balanced, practical and reasonable, and I do not know how to resist the temptation of tearing up everything I have written.

But I think . . .

20

We Have All Promised

DO not call me to you, brothers whom I love. Leave me alone, more and more alone. Do not marvel that I flee not only from other men, but from you too, brothers whom I love. Every day, I seek more distant solitudes and your voices reach me as the prayers of a procession that passes below in the valley on the far side of the stream.

Do not torment me any more. Leave me to eat out my soul unseen. You do not know what is laying waste my soul and, though I were to tell you, not even you could save me, oh brothers whom I love! Not even your voices could answer my sorrow.

I could only ask you: " Is there one amongst you to whom, on a long-forgotten day, I made a great promise? "

And what could you say to me? I know per-

fectly well that I never promised anything to any of you. I did not even promise to love you, and yet I love you so dearly, oh brothers whom to-day I leave on the sunny road!

I promised nothing to any of you and yet *I have promised something* to someone! That is what torments and overshadows my spirit.

I have promised something to someone!

What have I promised? To whom did I promise it? I do not know, cannot remember, cannot guess. But I feel it has happened and that I shall be held guilty if my promise is not kept!

For many years, I have had the impression of this latent pledge towards some latent being. It seemed to me that my life was a vain and useless thing, like a period of passive waiting or tedious preparation. I felt I was not born for the life of every day and of all men. It lay in me to achieve something that no one else could achieve.

And now at last I know why I felt all this, I understand why my life seemed like a meaningless pause.

I have promised — to someone, I have made a great promise and I must keep it. But how can I keep it if I do not remember what the promise

was, if I do not remember to whom I gave my oath? When did this grave and important event in my life happen? Perhaps in a forgotten dream, perhaps at a moment when my usual consciousness was asleep, perhaps in another life, a life I lived before this one and of which I have only a vague presentiment?

I cannot give an answer; no one can give an answer. I have questioned all the men around me, all the men I have known and those too whom I might have known, and all of them laughed when they heard my question and told me I had never promised them anything.

Laboriously I have tried to retrace my way up the stream of memory to find again, one by one, my deeds, my words, my varying fortunes, up to my childhood and my birth, to discover some sign of this unfulfilled promise which weighs on my life like the threat of an ever-renewed punishment.

And I have found nothing, discovered nothing! In the life I know, in the world I live in, there is no trace of this promise. And for this, I fret and torture myself and flee the company of those I love and of those who love me. I want to know what I must do, what I have promised to do, what it is necessary that I should do!

Otherwise, what good is my life? Have I come into the world to fill my belly, to use my legs, to revel in the golden-yellow of the broom and the blackness of the cypresses, to press the hands of others, to follow some little idea in the forest of words? Not for that was my body formed and my soul set aflame. Before my body is used up like an old coat, before my soul dies out like a forsaken altar-fire, the work must be done, the vow fulfilled, the promise kept.

Perhaps — mark well — *perhaps it is not only I who have made a great promise.* Perhaps, oh brothers whom I love, every man, in some life of his, in some moment of his life, has solemnly made his promise. Woe to him who does not know what he has promised! Woe to him who does not consider his life as a task, to which he bound himself when he was born! Woe to him if he does not every instant feel a sting of remorse for the task he has not done and which he took upon himself to do!

I do not know what I have promised, but I know I have promised something, and I want to know what it is that I have promised. But men — and you know it well, oh brothers whom I love — do not know even this. They live as if they had nothing to fulfil, enjoying the years as

a nice drinker enjoys, sip by sip, his golden wine. No voice awakens them, no réveille sends them hastening to their task. So they live until their last day and do not know that beyond the door of life, he, to whom they promised something, may be waiting. But I do not want to come thus to the dread day. I want my promise to have been fulfilled and my soul will know no peace until it has found it.

For this reason and for this alone, I flee from you, oh brothers whom I love. For this, I daily seek more distant solitudes, in the midst of the woods, on the heights, clothed in pine and chestnut, on rocky spurs that overhang valleys where even the streams are dead.

In this solitude, I can more easily hear the voices that call me. Every sound of the earth is a summons, a signal that calls us to work. When I am awakened by the bells pealing in the night, when I hear the tinkling of the herds of goats, when I listen to the grave soughing of the wind, I feel a mad longing to run, to shake myself, to dash forward, to do what the sound commands me.

But when I have leapt to my feet and strain my ears, I do not know what I have to do. I do not know, I do not yet know, I have not yet suc-

ceeded in knowing what I have promised! And the torture starts all over again and my soul eats itself out with renewed bitterness, and so my life passes, useless as the idle water in a ditch by an abandoned mill.

Let each one of you, oh brothers whom I love, seek to remember his promise!

Perhaps it was only this that I promised to someone: to remind you of your promises! And if I have done this, blessed be the tears that my solitude have seen.

21

Why Do You Love Me?

IS there really someone who trembles when she strokes my forehead and hides her little hand in my hair? Is there really a face that blushes when my voice betrays an involuntary tenderness? Is there really a breast that sighs and heaves when I draw near and press it to mine, and lips that grow soft and warm when I touch them with my lips?

Think — think well. Do not answer me straight away. Do not tell me it is all true and that I am not dreaming. Have no pity on me. Let no one have pity on me. I will allow no one to pity me. My tears are *mine;* they belong to *me;* they come from *my* heart; they roll down from *my* eyes. Why does that hand caress me slowly to be bathed with the grief that is *mine?*

Can it be that someone wants to take a part of my sorrow away from me? Is it possible that

someone awaits me with impatience, with anxiety, watching me from afar with clear eyes, listening with bated breath to the approach of my footsteps? Is it possible that my lightest words are remembered, that a glance of mine can give happiness, a smile of mine the promise of happiness, a gesture of mine the certainty of happiness?

Do not answer me yet. Do not tell me that all this is possible and that other things still, that I do not know, are possible. I could not believe it — I do not want to believe it! So think — think well! It would be so incredible, so marvellous a thing — new, unheard-of. But think for a moment what it would mean if it were true!

Another being — a being different from myself, whom first I did not know — lives only for me, thinks with my thoughts, feels with my feelings, is tortured by my sufferings, happy in my joys, brings her body close to my body, enters into my soul with her soul, and offers me all she possesses and all she will have and all that I could give her.

Do you believe this can be true, even for a moment? I remember, yes, that I leant my head on her shoulder, that I pressed her delicately-

veined hands, that I kissed her mouth many, many times and that for hours together I listened to the faint music of her breath, but what does all that prove? Was it really I, in person, at those moments? And did she really want to say what I wanted to hear in the inconscience of fleeting happiness?

Do not smile, do not shake your head, do not even answer yes, I pray you. You know that all this is a light tissue of imagination woven by the white hands of idleness.

Why should such an impossible thing be true for me? What have I done to earn the right to receive the gift of a life? What am I but a poor shame-faced poet, who hides his anguish as a miserly woman hides her jewels. What am I but a tragic pilgrim, proud of his cloak, but powerless to find either his house or his bed again?

Have I done anything great? Have I said any word that men had forgotten? Have I made men forget a single one of their cares?

If you knew how I despised myself and what a desperate disgust I have for my own soul! When others think me proud, haughty, self-satisfied, I am thinking only of a way to make my life less despicable, my soul less repulsive.

Of one thing alone I am sometimes proud: of the deep and sincere contempt I have for myself.

What can there be in me then to love? What can you find in my dissatisfied, even vile, soul that can give me the right to make your soul suffer? What can interest you amongst my forgotten joys, my unfulfilled dreams, my impotent desires, amongst the memories that even I fear to reawaken?

It is not possible, no, that anyone should love me. I do not want anyone to live for me. I cannot love and I do not want to be loved. Leave me in peace. Leave me alone. I do not want to feel anything more, to see anyone more. I do not know what to make of your sentimental faces and your words, punctuated with sighs. Do you not know then how voluptuous is voluntary solitude? What sweetness in the soul that will not hope any more!

Are you still here? Did I not drive you away without looking at you? Why do you look at me as if you wanted to see nothing but my eyes? Why is your hair so silky and some strands of it almost golden? Do not open your mouth, do not breathe so frenziedly. Your hand is soft, I know it. Your hand is strong, I know it. But why do you come so close to me? Why does your body

tremble suddenly? Do not look at me like that, do not press my hand so fervently. You know I love you and do not want to love you. . . .

But kiss me then. Do you not feel that I cannot resist any longer? Do not say yes; kiss me again! Kiss me on the eyes; close them with your lips, so that I see nothing more, know nothing more, and feel only your heart beating, your heart beating quickly, furiously, madly — your heart that is beating and for me alone.

22

Quicker

QUICKER, quicker! Where is the conductor of the world's orchestra? Call him — let him come to me instantly! Hasten the measure, hurry the time! Faster, swifter! Faster still, swifter still! Get on, in God's name!

Can you not feel how slowly and sluggishly this lazy world drags along? It is like a gouty old man, a limping decrepit cripple, a childish invalid! So get on, quicker and quicker still! Drag it along by force, make it run, push it fiercely, pull it along giddily like a dog at the end of a string. What do you mean by walking like a funeral procession? Why is your breathing the breathing of everlasting invalids? Why do you speak with the faint voice of a priest at prayer? How can you go on living in this deadening atmosphere between sleep and waking?

Wake up, I tell you, once and for all! Remember you are alive, you dumb animals! Let your steps grow firm, let your leaps be flights and your words cries, let your breath be strife, your life a fever, your fever a delirium. Get on then, you slow, sluggish, lazy, weary, sleeping world. Take no rest. Quicker — quicker — and quicker still — on and on . . .

Where is this conductor of the world's orchestra? Here he is. You are welcome. Listen and obey me. I want the stately dance of the universe to become a mad whirl. Can you not see how mawkish is this minuet? You lose time, are bored, weary, fall asleep. No more bows, no more pauses, no more rest. A mad dance without rhyme or reason — a wild Bacchanalia is what I want to see to-night!

How can you live so slowly, men? Can you not feel that everything moves too slowly — that things happen and pass with unbearable calm — that the whole world is like a tired old machine that is running down? Do you not realize how listless, drowsy, asleep you all are?

Who is the fool who talks of the flight of time? But do you not know what long dreary hours we wait for the night to come, and what long dreary hours for the return of day, and

what long, long years for youth to flower, and what long, long years for death to set us free?

Whatever there is to do, we have to wait — to achieve something or to end it, we have to wait. What we might do in an hour, we have to do in a day — what we might enjoy in a day, we have to enjoy hour by hour in a year. Everything is measured, calculated, foreseen. The evolutions of the world take place and pass regularly at the same intervals, in the same ages, and nothing can hasten them. Everything has to be diluted in the slow succession of days. What is life — the true, deep, intense life — but a few sparks in a field of ashes; a necklace of scattered pearls, strung on a long dreary grey thread? Yet we cannot live our whole life gloriously in a day. We cannot join the sparks to make the flame of an hour; we cannot gather together the pearls to make a brief loop of happiness.

Everything must take its course, slowly, slowly, slowly — methodically, circumspectly, cautiously. Everything must happen at the appointed hour and no sooner — let the water flow in its bed and not dash over a fall; let the wind gently caress the pale faces of men and not burst forth in a tempest to destroy them; let all life be a cautious vegetation and not an impetuous

thunderbolt of revolt launched against the earth.

But I would not have it so! I shall die of a fever if the earth goes on moving as slowly as this. Why does no one seem to suffer as I do in this sleepy universe? I feel I am strong, alert, eager, swift, hot, impetuous, and all around me, men see nothing and wait and sleep and die, thinking they are alive. But do you not know that an hour's joy in freedom, a moment's ecstasy or rapture, are worth all your whole century-long lives, your whole unruffled existence of marrowless nonentities? One day of life for all your years! My whole life for a day! A child in the morning, a lover at noon, a poet at sunset, a sage when night falls. All the joy you would grant me, oh God in heaven, give me in an hour. Let the seasons follow moment by moment — let the sun rise and set every minute — let every heart-beat mark a new joy!

I will not wait! I will not fall asleep! Quicker and quicker still! Where is this conductor of the world's orchestra? Has he fled once more? Follow him, bring him here. Let him come to me instantly. If you cannot find him, bring me a captain, a hunter, a savage — a man who knows the value of speed.

Leap on your horses, spur them on, goad them with savage cuts, lash them without mercy! But on, on, quicker and quicker still! Let life be a desperate gallop, a furious assault, a pursuit without end, a flight without reason, but something that flies and does not drag and stand still.

You race of sleepers, you crowd of weary watchers, here comes the wind, howling like the voice of some giant demi-god. Death comes even after sleep — make it come more quickly, but let it find you awake and riotous as Bacchanalians.

On, I tell you! swifter and swifter still! Hasten time, lash your horses, urge on your hearts! Quicker — quicker — and quicker still. Here comes death . . .

Long live death!

23

A Mental Death

THE true story of one of the most extraordinary suicides in recent years would never have been known, did I not possess the vice of wandering around in search of *eccentrics,* in the hope — almost always superfluous, it is true — of one day finding a really *surpassing* one.

We all know, *we others,* how *defective* are statistics — I say *defective* deliberately, in the sense of imperfect. Although certain of our vegetating moralists go about bewailing the continual increase of voluntary deaths, with long horror-stricken faces, I know for myself that by no means all of them are registered. Amongst the sick and those who are killed — apparently — suicides abound. They are perhaps in the majority. Something almost makes me say that *every death is voluntary.* But how? In what way?

Alas! In the most common and ordinary ways possible! Lack of wisdom, lack of will — there are so few who foresee and are able to do — a dashing against fate, as birds against a serpent or madmen on a funeral pyre. Men have not wished to live and have preferred the brief present to the long and certain future. Leopardi would approve: but who can deny that these are lives *cut short?*

The suicide of which I discovered the secret, did not in any way resemble those known until then. Neither history nor the daily news tells of another like or equal to it.

It was difficult to find a way no one had used before. All the least obvious expedients have been discovered and put into practice: now and again, the newspapers, long since tired of the commonplace shootings and daily poisonings, relate some one or other as a special curiosity, in order to win a smile from its light-hearted readers. But *he* found one and used it.

I made the acquaintance of the future suicide in a curious way. (I must confess that, in the people who have been *introduced* to me in the regular way, I have rarely found anything exceptional). One morning, I was poking about in

a handcart of old books when I came across the first volume of Dostoievski's *Besi* in the French translation. I had read it some time ago and several times; and then it was only the first volume, so I had not the slightest intention of buying it. But unconsciously, I started to turn over the pages and instinctively stopped at the page on which the engineer Kiriloff sets forth in such simple words his ideas on suicide. I had already noticed, here and there in the margins, various forcible red pencil marks, but on this page there were notes as well. They were written in faded black pencil. However, I managed to decipher them.

"Not like that — It is true: one must overcome the fear of death and so kill oneself, but not like that. Suicide with one's hands: that is butcher's work — One must deny and destroy life on its own account, little by little, without shattering the body suddenly: that is stupid. . . ."

These few lines, written lengthways in the margin, aroused my curiosity as it had not been roused for a long time.

Who could have written such words? And what was his method, his death without dying? Nervously, I went on turning over the pages of

the book. Wonder of wonders: on the flyleaf at the beginning, I found what I was looking for: a label, one of those horrible purple business labels — with a name, a surname and an address!

OTTO KRESSLER
25, *via delle Ruote*

I gave the bookseller a couple of coins and hurried home with the book in my pocket. No sooner was I in my room than I examined it carefully: there were more notes, but they added nothing stranger than those I had already read. These alone sufficed, however, to leave me no peace of mind until I had found the owner of the book. But would it be he who had written them? And that German name on the label, would it belong to the last owner and mysterious annotator? And would he still be in the same house?

Whatever conjectures I might make, there was nothing to be done but to follow this clue, the only one. It gave me no rest. Picking up the book and my hat, I hurried out again.

2

In a few minutes — I have long legs and my nervous excitement lent me speed — I reached No. 25, *via delle Ruote.*

I rang at the dirty little street door. It was opened:

" Who is there? "

It was a child's voice. And indeed, when I had climbed two flights of stairs, I saw a pale-faced little girl standing in the doorway with a red pinafore and bare feet.

" Whom are you looking for? "

" Is Mr. Otto Kressler still here? "

The child opened her eyes wide and thought for a moment. Then, suddenly, she cried:

" Mummy, mummy, come here! "

There appeared a little woman of about forty, with a bad-tempered face and as dirty as her daughter. She looked at me askance:

" Whom do you want? "

I repeated the name. I perceived that my question did not please her at all.

" Do you know him? " she demanded suspiciously.

" I do not know him, but I have to see him at once on business."

The woman hesitated, but fear prevailed:

" He is not here any more. It is three months ago on the 15th since he left."

" And where is he now? "

" I don't know."

" Really? And is there no one else who would know? "

" Try the wine-shop next door and ask for Cecchino. It was he who took in his letters."

I nodded and went downstairs. A few yards away, there was one of those wine-shops with red curtains, the colour of dirty blood and bad wine, and with a bottle painted on a piece of pasteboard on the left. I went in. Phew, what a stench! Fortunately, no one was there, not even a soul at the bar.

" Hey, landlord! "

From the gloomy depths of the shop, I heard a shuffling of stools and straw and then a woman with a flushed face came towards me, scowling in a way that was half embarrassed and half threatening.

" There is someone here! " she shouted, without coming nearer.

Then from behind her, there appeared a fair weedy-looking youth with a blue apron tucked around his waist:

" What do you want? "

" Excuse me, are you Cecchino? "

" Yes."

" Did you know a certain Mr. Otto Kressler who lived next door here? "

" To be sure I did. But he has gone away now."

" And where is he? "

I saw that he too did not want to answer me. He looked at me closely and then said softly:

" Excuse me, but what does that matter to you? To tell you the truth, he is a poor wretch and doesn't even know what he is doing. He owes money in an odd place or two on the street and it seems to me a sin to send someone after him. I have never acted the spy, God knows, and have managed to get along all the same."

" You are mistaken: I want nothing from him. On the contrary, if anything, I have something to give him and I want to see him on a very important matter. . . . I have never seen him before to-day."

" You know, I don't trust you. If you could see what a queer chap he is! And it seems he doesn't remember anything or care for anything. And sometimes, he talks to himself . . . but he

is a decent fellow all the same and when he has something, he isn't as mean as some people."

"Listen: they told me you knew where he is now: tell me; you will be doing him a good turn too."

The youth eyed me narrowly once more; then, it may have been that he was convinced I was neither a policeman nor a creditor, or it may have been he cared little about the secret, in any case, he answered:

"If they haven't taken him to the hospital these last few days, you will find him in the *via della Stufa* at No. 2."

I thanked him and took my leave.

It is not far from the *via delle Ruote* to the *via della Stufa* and I was there in a few minutes.

No. 2 was one of those old Florentine *palazzi* of the fifteenth or sixteenth century with tall round-arched windows, ornamented with roughly hewn stone bosses and with a walled-in loggia near the top. Somewhat dirty and with the plaster peeling off the walls, the windows half walled-up, signs of dilapidation everywhere.

There was a cobbler-porter who, without raising his head from his shoe and with no sign of surprise, answered my question:

"Top story on the right."

I went up the stairs, filthy with spitting and spider-webs. At the top, I knocked. Another child opened the door. Mr. Kressler was at home and came to meet me himself at the threshold of his room.

Perhaps in time I may forget his appearance, but up to the present moment, it is clearly and indelibly impressed on my mind.

Otto Kressler was, as I had already imagined, tall and gaunt. His face, which was long and thin, as if they had pressed in his cheeks by force when he was little, looked like a caricature of a Hoffmanesque apparition. Eyes, deep-set, incredibly so, yet flashing fire; a nose, long, hooked and delicately chiselled; a mouth that was curved without being effeminate, and voluptuous though sarcastic and bitter at the same time; overlapping teeth, a pointed chin. His face was clean-shaven and very red, like clotted blood, that spread over the whole face and down to the neck. He was badly dressed and wore a fawn overcoat and a battered hat on his head as if he were just about to go out.

I had been so anxious to find him that I had not even given a thought as to what I should say to him, what reasonable excuse I should

offer for my visit. As I went in, I did not know what to say. Necessity made me frank.

"Are you Mr. Kressler?"

He nodded.

"I should like to speak to you at once."

He pointed towards his room and I went in. It was a large room, almost empty, that looked out over the house-tops. On a long packing-case a mattress was flung and over the mattress a coverlet and pillow. There were no seats, except one cane chair. Against the wall, hung on cords, were boards of books, and in a corner, a music-stand, tall, black and solid. Kressler drew up the chair for me and sat down on the improvised bed, looking me in the face without a word, as if he expected the whole conversation to come from my side.

I did not lose courage: but, pulling the volume of Dostoievski out of my pocket, handed it to him.

"Is this your book?"

"It was mine some time ago. They took it with some other books, where I used to live, and sold everything to pay what I owed them. I still have the second volume. The landlady was stupid. . . ."

"And is this writing in the margin yours?"

I went on, pointing to the notes next to Kirileff's words.

"It is mine. But why?"

Kressler was perfectly cool and seemed quite insensible to the strangeness of my visit and my questions.

"Because," I interrupted him abruptly, "I read these words and found they hinted at a way, a new way of death, a death that is not the work of hands, a superior kind of suicide. I am very much interested in this and have some ideas on it. . . . So that I seek out all those who feel this difficulty in choosing and cannot make up their minds to going out by any kind of a door. I have come to you to know whether this way exists, if you have really found *something* and if this *something* will be carried out. . . ."

As I went on talking, my listener, little by little, lost some of his *sang-froid*. From the depths of their sockets, his pupils seemed to dilate towards me and his eyes came out of their hollows as a beast comes out of its den.

"Yes, yes . . . That is it!" he exclaimed. "Is it possible that anyone could think of it seriously — and here in Italy! So you came to me to know about this matter of true death?"

"Only for that."

Kressler got up; he seemed deeply moved. His hand sought and grasped mine. I had to tell him my name. I could see by his face that he wanted to embrace me.

"If you could speak of it now," I went on, "but you were just going out."

"No, no, I was not going out at all. I am always dressed like this, even in the house. I hate undressing. We can quite well speak of it now, at once, as much as you want. I will tell you everything, all you want to know. Before I die, the idea shall be yours. Transfusion and communication; I had not thought of it; I had no one. There are so many ears, but so few brains! And then here! Perhaps in Germany. . . . But I cannot go back: destitute! You see!"

He waved his hand towards the empty room, the book-boards, the window-panes, broken and stuffed out with old paper.

"You want to hear my history? But my history is only beginning now. The first chapter of my life will be the last and its epitaph will serve as its title too. I have a German name; my father was a Bavarian who had immigrated here. My mother is Italian and is still alive, and — like all mothers — understands nothing. I was something like a clerk or writer in a ma-

chine store. My father was one of these modern business men, with a spattering of Bismarck about him. An idiot, for the rest, and made worse by Goethe and Chianti, to whom he had become converted in the last few years. But I wrote and copied and added, and ever in my mind was the idea of life. The usual story: you know it by heart. What are we? Where are we going? Is it worth while living? etc., etc. In the evenings, instead of going out, I read and asked of every book what no man could tell me. I wanted life, the best, the most beautiful life possible, and I could not see it around me, not even in those who, according to the others, *were having a good time*. Even the ideals of the philosophers failed to convince me. I tried to put them into practice one after the other and it was one hope after another dashed to pieces. And yet, without some metaphysical, some rational point of support, I could not live. I seemed to myself more despicable than a dog that lives on charity, goes out muzzled and pisses at every street-corner. I left my job and as a result had to leave my family too. I wandered over the earth, on foot, without a cent; begging hospitality and giving such lessons as I could. I was arrested twice, but set free again a few days later. At

last I arrived in Germany; I was homesick for the country I had never seen. Every day, I walked a little further. Whenever I found a pleasant spot, I stopped and lay down on the grass, in the fields, on the stone benches of sleepy little towns. With evening, came the stars; then I thought and slept. I ate very little; I drank from fountains, springs and ditches. And all the time, I thought and thought. Even when I was sleeping, I went on thinking. To all those questions, I knew and guessed the answers, and yet it was from another side that light came to me — from a priest. It was an old priest whom I met one day in front of a country church. He was walking up and down the common, deep in thought, and seeing me so tired and sad, he spoke to me and asked me if I were thirsty. We started to talk. He seemed to me more intelligent than the usual run of priests. I told him something of my doubts, my search, my disquietude. And it was then that I heard the words that suddenly opened my mind.

" ' But do you not understand that the meaning of life lies in death and in death alone? Only he who wants to die, who is *already dead* to life now, can enjoy and taste and know life! '

" Perhaps these words were but the echo of

some conventionally ascetic spot in his mind and devoid for him of all deeper meaning. Perhaps he was repeating them from some ecclesiastical medley whence, in his college days, he had copied them for their seeming sacred paradox. I cannot tell, but for me they were a discovery, a revelation, the beginning of a new existence.

" That same evening, at the presbytery — where the priest had invited me to eat and sleep — I turned them over and over in my mind, illuminated them with all the light of my reason and drew out of them everything they might contain and more still. To-day, these truths are so familiar to me that I scarcely know what to do with them and if I recall them now, it is only to make them known to you, but then! . . . That the secret of life lies in death, I had suspected for some time, but in a negative and physical sense, though at the same time so daringly transcendental and fideistic that my mind had absolutely refused to accept it. A pistol shot: *bang!* and then light, great, eternal, definite light. It may be! Perhaps! But if not? Prince Hamlet, for all they say, was no fool.

" But here, in the words of this rustic priest, there lay more: not merely the arid cutting-off

of the brain, of the circulation, etc., by flinging oneself hopefully into the sea of possibility, but the death of life, the present, actual, immediate realization of a state of death in the state of life.

" Do you understand? "

Kressler paused for a moment, gazing at me out of the glowing hollows of his eyes. I did not know what to answer there and then and, in that brief silence, the door was flung open violently and there appeared a short, squat man in shirt sleeves, livid in the face — a thorough ruffian — who stared insolently at the two of us.

Kressler had no sooner seen him than he got up, ran towards him and went out, closing the door after him. . . . A moment later, I heard cries and curses, the banging of tables and slamming of chairs. . . . I could not catch a word: but a confused babble of vulgar rage filled the house. Then came three or four minutes silence and Kressler appeared once more and flung himself on to the bed. He was rather pale, and thick, dark drops of blood were oozing from a long scratch across his forehead, just above his left eyebrow. The strange man took out his handkerchief, pressed it to the wound and murmured by way of excuse:

" They are determined to turn me out. They won't have to wait long. . . ."

I realized that, had I not been there, he might have started to cry. This unexpected and mysterious scene upset me: I got up to take my leave. When Kressler saw it, he rose too and held out his hand. For the moment, I had forgotten all about my curiosity and, without asking him another question, I bade him good-bye and went out.

When I had left the house and street behind me, I looked around as if I were waking from a dream. Evening was coming on; everything had that vague and ethereal appearance that follows close upon sunset, and makes all things look as if they were illuminated from within. The shops were gold and white beneath their lights; in the darkening streets, men passed like swift, silent shadows. That deep sense of the continuous and endless futility of all efforts, which comes back with every setting of the sun, seemed to have penetrated even the souls of the pedlars and street-girls. I went along slowly and thoughtfully, straight ahead, not knowing where to stop, striving to recall the features and words of this man I had seen and listened to but a little while before. But everything distracted my at-

tention — the look of a woman, the curse of a child, the illuminated sign of a theatre. Every ringing of bells made me start: and memories and regrets chased each other through the stormy darkness of my mind.

Suddenly, next to me, I heard a voice:

" This way, this way, we shall be more alone."

I turned around: it was Kressler. Kressler dressed as I had seen him in the house, and looking at me as if nothing had happened. He took me by the arm and I went with him. He had left the house directly after me and had followed me. We went towards the river: far away on the horizon, there was still a white streak of light. A double row of yellow lights was reflected tremulously in the dark water.

Kressler started to talk again:

" I think you have already understood. I understood everything immediately, on the first evening. The priest's words only described one special case in a law I believe and see to be universal. Not only the secret of life lies in death, but the secret of light and darkness, of good and evil, of truth and error, of yes and no! So that every Faust who wants to live, every soul that would embrace life as a lover would embrace his mistress, to feel, to kiss, to possess her en-

tirely, must prepare to die, must sow the seeds of death in himself. If we succeed at some moment in living intensely, it is because life is a slow death and every joy is but one of the many shudders and death-rattles of this long agony.

" From that day onwards, I decided to renounce life, to give myself the soul of a dead man — to die rapidly. But not suddenly, and not by outward and material means. To be a corpse before it is necessary to be buried — to commit suicide so that death seems natural and involuntary. That is my discovery: to kill yourself by your will, by your own soul and not with weapons, not with your own hands, not with poison: to die by dint of thinking you want to die. And that is what I am doing. That is what you wanted to know from me. Are you satisfied? "

I looked at him in amazement, because he pronounced these last words in a tone of almost contemptuous rage. But he quickly recovered himself.

" Pay no attention to me: my death is not yet complete. The truth is that suicide as it is practised to-day and has always been practised, fills me with loathing. Those blood-stained knives, those agonized contortions of poisoning, that

leaping from high places to be dashed to pieces, those revolver shots, have always seemed to me something low, ugly, butcherly, ignoble. Why destroy the masterpiece of our body with these brutal slashings and drown the nobility of our soul in these disgusting slaughters? The soul is capable of everything, the soul is everything, the will is mistress of the universe. It is sufficient *to will* to die, but to will it seriously, firmly, constantly and, little by little, death takes possession of us and penetrates us completely, so that afterwards, a single breath is enough to send us hence. And to will, in this case, means *not to will*. We live by a continual effort of the will and in order to die, this will must grow less and less and we must will only not to will. The whole of life is made up of strife: and if we strive no longer, no more at all, in no way, life shrinks and dwindles of its own accord and, by accepting all and renouncing all, everything tends to balance itself, and fuses and blends into a single thing. To will is difficult, but incomparably more difficult it is not to will. We have not yet reached that stage. Every day and every hour, I am killing myself, but every now and then, when least I expect it, the devilish instinct of resistance and the mad impulse of desire awake

again and drive me back amongst the living, amongst men.

"But even now, I am nearer to death and so to happiness than many who seek in life what life cannot ever give them. And I shall no sooner be dead than the whole of life will take me back as its favourite child and nothing the sun shines upon and colours will be denied me. Even at this very moment, I have already a foretaste of these joys. For others, I am nothing — I do not eat, I do not read, I do not amuse myself, I do not love, I do not play, I do not earn: I am half dead already. I hardly breathe and move. . . . And yet, I would not give these days of mine for all the fair women in London, for all the strong-rooms in America. What for others is the sky, is for me a window, and the whole earth with its oceans is a stairway to the top of a tower and nothing more, and in the silence of the night, the music that reaches my ears is more voluptuously sad than that of Chopin and more mystically solemn than that of Beethoven. No woman can be as perfect as she who loves me in my thoughts and whom, every day, I create from head to foot, like the good God of the Bible, and all the systems and conceptions of the most profound maniacs you and I know are paper hoops and

stringless kites in comparison to the direct possession of reality beyond the gates of space and the hours of time."

Kressler stopped short suddenly, as he had done before when the man threatened him from the door. He looked around seeking to escape my glance. It seemed to me that he repented having spoken and was almost ashamed.

" Give me your address," he resumed, " when the time draws near, I will let you know. Do not come to see me any more."

I gave him my visiting-card and we parted with no sign of feeling. Never have I seen a sadder face than his that evening.

For four months, I heard nothing more of him. A few weeks ago, a woman came to see me on his account.

" What is the matter? " I asked. " Is he ill? Is he dying? "

" It seems so."

I hurried to the *via della Stufa*. I found him in a real bed, propped up amongst sheets. An old lady was sitting next to him and watching. He had grown still thinner, but the dusky red of his face had not yet given place to the pallor of death. I approached the bed.

" I was right," he whispered in a low voice,

" the discovery is made. The will is conquered; I am dead already. In a few hours or days, the last sign of life will cease. . . . No one has killed me. . . . I alone . . . without my hands. What blessedness! no human tongue can say . . . I am dead. . . . I have killed myself. . . . it is enough to will. . . . everyone can imitate me, you know my secret. . . . This is true life — the only . . ."

Whilst Kressler was speaking, the old lady moved restlessly: my presence seemed to make her suffer horribly.

At last, she could bear it no longer.

" Go away," she cried, " go away from here, murderer! "

I believe she was jealous of me or perhaps she believed I was one of those who had helped to drive her son mad and cause his death. Kressler did not trouble to enlighten her and half shut his eyes, as if he wanted to know nothing more. I did not think of arguing nor trying to persuade her and left the room with my heart in a turmoil.

Two days later, Kressler died in the human and scientific sense of the word. Behind the shabby hearse, the mother's carriage rumbled along, slow and mournful as a vain regret.

24

The Universal Aunt

THE Universal Aunt — as the most caustic man of genius in the town calls her — was at home every Sunday from ten to twelve to all those who needed her advice. The Universal Aunt's business was precisely that of giving advice to men and women, nor did an hour pass in which she fell short of her onerous duty. The week-days were given over to impersonal advice, enlarged upon in vehement books or poured forth at public meetings; it was aimed at the nameless masses, at all those who might possess a few cents to buy it and a great deal of self-denial to follow it. Sundays, on the other hand, were given over to confidential, personal and gratuitous advice, to special cases, complicated exceptions and arduous problems. For this, the bodily presence of the prophetess was essential, as was also the immediate contact of soul to soul by means of the eyes.

The Universal Aunt was famous throughout the region. Her books were promptly translated into every civilized tongue; her ideas were discussed with that enthusiasm which women always put into useless matters; her features, those of a robust, middle-aged woman, with an inspired purpose in life, were familiar to all the readers of illustrated reviews and the enthusiasm of her followers was almost equal to that which she cherished for herself. And the reason for all this good fortune, fame and popularity was a single one: she gave advice on matters of love.

The Universal Aunt, naturally, had never loved nor been loved. No one had known her as a fiancée, wife or mistress. No platonic declaration had offended her ears; no sensual attack set her heart beating nor driven her into sin; no mayor nor priest had legally given her into the hands of a man. Her virginity had remained safe and untouched. Her youth had passed without thrills or sensations and her liberty had never been prostituted to the bestial will of a male.

What does it do to you then, this being unloved and unloving? You start to talk of love, to argue about it, to condemn it, to give advice on it. Having never in her life known true love,

love in practice, the eternal spinster is convinced that she is in an ideal position to rewrite the theories and law of love. As courtesans, growing old, hasten to become bawds, so this frigid negation of passion set herself up as the adviser and manager of the affections of others. It is no use: there must be an outlet somewhere! A woman without love is unthinkable and cannot exist in *rerum natura*. This woman, neither having nor wanting actual love, had to content herself with love in the abstract and her kisses were — aphorisms; her love-letters — meetings; her caresses — books.

As I said before, the Universal Aunt was at home every Sunday morning from ten to twelve, to all those who wished to hear her words of wisdom on the secrets of their heart. On her stairs, you would meet, unsmiling, even blushing a little, the faces of those vanquished in the " struggle for true passion," the heroic survivors of disillusions and betrayals, the dissatisfied wives in search of respectable freedom (for the Aunt was a specialist in separations and divorces), and the tremulous beginners and acolytes who came to gather light and strength before embarking for Cytherea. The famous spinster received all these people in a spacious room,

where numerous photographs of Italian frescoes were intended to show the artistic feeling and spiritual refinement of the proprietress. In front of her desk — such correspondence! such press-clippings! — there was a couch on which she never sat nor permitted others to sit. She sometimes confided to her most intimate friends that on that couch she seemed to see a couple of happy, smiling lovers and that she did not want them to be disturbed. She made people sit down next to her, under the compelling gaze of her sibyllic eyes, and the confessions took their course and the advice was not slow to follow. How often has a mere word of hers, a gesture, a simple movement of the eyes, decided the fate of a family, the peace of mind of a husband, the life or death of a maid! No one dared to rebel against her words. *She* had spoken and it must be done. Sure of her power, she had ended by setting aside all conscientious scruples; the great thing was to settle matters quickly; the conviction of her faith gave her courage even in the face of the absurd, the extraordinary and what elderly relations call principles and conventions. It must be confessed that this voluntary mission sometimes led to results by no means pleasing to the inexperienced devotees.

But the stoic missionary refused to be upset more than was absolutely necessary and, having brushed back her ugly hair with both hands, passed on to other and more pressing thoughts. Here for instance is an exciting and pitiful case in which her strength of mind was put to a hard test.

One Sunday morning, towards mid-day, there came to her house a young girl, quite pretty and not too shy, who insisted on being received at once. There was at the moment no visitor in the sibyl's room, but the young lady had to wait all the same, in order that the wonted five minutes might lead her to appreciate the imminent importance of the solemn and distinguished interview.

However, in good time, the door was opened and the girl, sitting in front of the venerated armchair and great watchful eyes, could speak freely. It was really an interesting and remarkable case. The young lady was of excellent family, fairly well educated, an intrepid reader of the dogmatic works of the prophetess, with a complete faith and conviction in her ideas. The candidate, after these preliminaries, declared frankly that she wanted a son as quickly as possible. But how? Certainly not any kind of a son,

an ordinary son by the first man who might turn up as a husband. In the first place, her parents — sensible, steady people — did not want her to marry yet, and, on the other hand, those who had so far turned up to offer her a new name had seemed to her neither more nor less than hopeless idiots. In short, it was not the husband she cared about, but the son, and she wanted this fruit of her womb to be due to a man in every way superior, intellectual, enlightened, so as to correspond to the precepts of the very latest sexual philosophy. In order to choose this man, this perfect author of a future masterpiece, well and with all possible precautions, the young lady now turned, as was right, to the source of her inspiration. The Universal Aunt could not refuse to consider so strange and delicate a case. Had she not more than once affirmed in her books that a woman, even if she has no right to a man, has at least the right to a son? Had she not upheld, with drawn sword and all the virtuous eloquence of which she was capable, that the choice of the future father should be made regardless of conventions, riches, social ties, since the creation of healthy and enlightened sons is the most important thing of all? Now that in real life there appeared a responsible

and earnest human being who intended to carry out these theories in the flesh, she could not say no. And she did not. On the contrary, she praised the young lady warmly for the courage of her intentions and assured her that she herself would choose, amongst the men she knew, the one most worthy to satisfy her needs. And the young lady went away, well pleased, promising to come back within a week.

The next Sunday, she came on the stroke of ten and was shown in immediately. The broad beaming face of the prophetess presaged good news. The man was found. He was superlatively intellectual, cultured, famous; he had written a dozen books, he inclined towards modern ideas; he promised, in a word, to give life to a child that should be a pattern of the future enlightened generations: a superchild. His name was so-and-so. Everyone knew him, the newspapers often spoke of him, the young lady herself had seen him at a theatre and at a private house and she by no means disapproved of him: quite the contrary! In his eyes shone the pure flame of poetry and his long hair must have known the sudden storms of inspiration. There was only one slight inconvenience, a trifling difficulty:

the famous writer was married. But could that prove a serious and decisive obstacle to two determined women, free from prejudice and steeped in modern ideas? By no means. The choice was warmly approved by the young lady who, after suitably expressing her thanks, set to work immediately.

Without even writing for an interview with the appointed hero, she had the courage to go straight to his house to ask him openly for what she wanted. The famous man, though on the strength of his profession as a novel-writer he believed himself familiar with the workings of the feminine mind, was at first somewhat surprised and asked for time to think about it. But during the following days, by dint of turning the strange proposal over and over in his mind, he easily grew accustomed to the idea of his enforced paternity and ended by consenting to it. His vanity was rather tickled by the peremptory choice; the girl was by no means ugly; the adventure original and without responsibilities for the future and finally, a writer who still has books to write cannot afford to refuse an unusual experience.

The matter was therefore decided upon and carried out. But no sooner was the result of this

illegal collaboration visible than the parents of the young lady drove their daughter out of the house without mercy or pity. The town was small and the news of the scandal spread like wildfire under the repeated seal of secrecy. One of the first persons to know *everything* was naturally the wife of the famous writer and predestined father. What do you suppose happened? A scene in the grand style, an outburst of savage despair? Not at all. The lady, like her husband, was very intellectual and imbued with the latest theories. It happened that her marriage was childless and this gave her a noble and reasonable motive for making, in her turn, another proposal. Whether it was that she had a profoundly generous nature, or whether for inscrutable reasons of her own she wanted to get rid of her husband, the fact remains that she proposed to divorce him.

" I have not even succeeded in giving you one son," she said to the ' enlightened man,' " whilst you immediately had one by *her*. So she has more right to possess you than I. Let us get a divorce, and then marry her."

When a woman has put it into her head to prove incompatibility of character, there is nothing more to be said about it in heaven or

earth. Everything fell out then as the lady had proposed and within a few months the writer was free. But the programme was not carried out to the end. The father did not marry the girl. And why? The young lady had become a mother and had not gone back to her home: she lived on a small allowance from her parents and travelled from place to place with her child. Was it she who did not want the father, since she already had what she wanted most? Or was it the ' enlightened man ' who did not want to turn a strange adventure into a perpetual and, considering her ideas, somewhat dangerous tie? A little later, so they say, he married another woman.

Some years have passed since then. The young lady, still unmarried, always lonely, always melancholy, still wanders from place to place with her child. She crosses land and sea, and changes towns and hotels, but the flight of time finds her more lonely and more melancholy than ever. Her son is a big boy and, up to the present, has shown no sign of special intelligence. On the contrary, those who know him well say he seems rather an idiot, and do not realize the tragedy of it. The one last hope of her life — for which she sacrificed her whole ex-

istence — is about to vanish. The Universal Aunt, as far as possible, avoids talking of the matter.

And the worst of this story is that it is absolutely true.

25

The Substitute Suicide

IT was useless. Every effort seemed to make matters worse. The little cloth hat could not be made to cover that shameful baldness, streaked with the scanty drawn hairs that, three times a week, the barber spread across his skull as the last barrier to every illusion of vanity. The movements that pushed the poor little hat from right to left were, according to the unexpressed opinion of the mathematician present, a pure waste of energy. My poor friend was even more nervous than on other days. A single cup of coffee — and what miserable coffee! — had reduced him to this state. He could not keep still: his chair wriggled about under him with low grunts and sudden muffled thuds. The cigarettes — he had smoked two packets in a few hours — had thrown him into a fever of chattiness that was starting to get on my

nerves. From the early morning, when he had arrived in town, I had not had the heart to leave him alone. He appeared to be suffering, but he did not want to talk of what was making him suffer. To see him sitting there in the café, with a pencil in his hand, his eyes askew, his hat on one side, and the end of a cigarette hanging out at one end of his purple lips, was enough to alarm anyone, and the head waiter had already asked me in a whisper why I did not take him home.

I proposed it to him.

"Home?" he said, eyeing me suspiciously, "and where is my home? I have not a stone on which to lay my head."

He spoke these last words with a faint smile, but immediately resumed his tragic tone of voice.

"Why," he went on, "should one not have the right to repeat Christ's words? Are we not sons of man like he? Have we not like he to drink the dregs of bitterness? And, if I wanted to, could I not one day be tortured like he?"

The mathematician who up to that moment had not opened his lips except to sip his *café au lait* turned to me and let drop, from the heights of his wisdom, a brief maxim:

"Heroics!"

My friend made no reply. He fumbled with his poor hat once more and called aloud:

"Waiter!"

A boy in a red uniform, with a mouth like a frog, answered the call.

"A lighted candle!"

When the candle was in front of him, with its fine brass cigar-holder, he held out one hand over the flame, gritting his teeth the while.

"What are you doing?"

I tried to pull back his arm, but he warded me off with the other one and went on holding his hand edgewise over the flame. All the people in the café had looked up and were watching us: even the proprietor came hurrying along as solemn as can be, with his eyes popping out of his head, and not knowing what to say. The mathematician looked at the clock. There was a smell of burning. Some of the men got up, saying it was a filthy sight, and went away without paying their bill.

I gave his arm another tug and put out the candle. My friend pulled out his handkerchief, bandaged his blackened hand and said in a voice trembling with hate:

"I did it to answer that idiot." And he got up.

We left the café amid a babel of voices. Some talked of fetching the police and others a doctor. One lady declared roundly:

"He is a fakir, he is a fakir!"

In silence, we left the streets in the centre of the town behind us and crossed the bridge to climb the hill that had so often welcomed our friendly talks. The sun was darting lightning from the gold of the basilica and in the middle of the façade, the enormous Christ in mosaic, with black hair and wide-open eyes, gazed sternly on the lower town that lay heedless at his feet.

But we did not reach the top. We left the road and took the short cut that leads to the olive grove. From the close-cropped grass rose the ruined walls, breached by the Republicans, and, further up, the marble crosses of an opulent-looking cemetery. At the foot of a tree, an old woman in a red shawl was thoughtfully combing her hair and looking carefully at the comb from time to time.

"Let us stop here," said my friend. "I do not want to walk and I wanted to tell you something."

We sat down as best we could on the stones at the edge of the lane. The grating of the trams,

as they turned the curve on the road below, came up to us, and the voice of a child calling insistently for someone. The gentle breath of the open air in that solitary nook seemed to have calmed my companion. Now and again, he felt his burnt hand and, had not an involuntary tear glistened on his eyelashes, one would have judged him a man like any other. All sense of shame had passed; he had thrown away his little cloth hat, and his egg-shaped head, bald on top and at the temples, and red from hyperaemia, was cooling itself in the evening breeze.

"Do you know when I was born?" he asked me after a long silence.

"I know you are more than thirty-two, but I do not know the actual day you were born."

"The day after to-morrow, I shall complete my thirty-third year."

He said these words in a low voice, as if he were telling me a great secret.

"And what has that to say?" I answered with my usual matter-of-fact dullness. "Time passes for all of us and, after all, you are not old yet."

What contempt lay in his grey eyes! I can see them again now as I had never seen them up to

that moment. I had never noticed that he had such compelling eyes.

"Listen," he resumed, "you do not understand anything. I hoped you might understand a little more than the others and I have not yet lost hope. I swear to you I will do everything possible, up to my last drop of blood, to save you, do you understand? — to save you."

"But will you explain once and for all!" I answered, half annoyed and half offended, "today, you have done nothing but chatter a little bit about everything without rhyme or reason, and you have talked the most arrant nonsense without giving me a chance to reply. A little while ago, at the café, you played that sorry joke to annoy a man who is of no importance at all. Now you are coming out with mysterious sayings and meaningless riddles. What do you want? You want to save me? And from whom? And how? Let us talk sense, for heaven's sake!"

"Listen to me," he resumed in a changed and almost pathetic voice, "you know I always liked you and you are the only man in whom I had any hope. I always poured out my heart to you, not entirely, but more than to the others. More than once, I chose you for my companion; I have written you letters that you cannot have

forgotten. Now, I choose you too for this last confession and you seem determined to make me feel that you are not worthy of it. But I have no time to lose and I am not going to let you be. Do not imagine I am trying to seem mad or mysterious to make myself more interesting. I have done it at other times, since a little charlatanism, if well used, is helpful even to genius, but to-day, I have no wish for it. I shall speak to you as frankly as I can. I have told you that in two days I shall complete my thirty-third year. I did not tell you in order to chant a dirge on the vanishing of youth. This is really an important date for me. For other men, it means nothing, to pass from thirty-three to thirty-four. It is a change of figure and no more. For me, on the other hand, it is an extremely grave moment. Thirty-three is for me the sacred, the divine, the perfect age. According to me, the man, who has not shown himself capable of greatness at that moment, will never do any good even if he live to be a thousand. Those who have not realized their genius at thirty-three or given a certain promise for the near future, have a precise and terrible duty to perform. When he was thirty-three, Christ went to his death. It is the solemn and classic age of supreme sacrifice. He

who has not succeeded in giving his soul to men must at least give his life. I have now come to that point. For long years, I thought of doing something greater than the rest and, up to this moment, I have dragged myself along in the wake of my barren discontentedness, always hoping in a miracle and the future. Now, I stand condemned and renounce everything. I am going to cut off my perfectly useless existence. I shall end my years and my life on the same day. I am absolutely determined on this step and no one can move me. I too am going to sacrifice myself for someone and my death will not be as useless as my birth. Listen to me well, for here it concerns you. I am going to kill myself for you, I am going to kill myself in your place. I am going to leave my life to save yours. As I have told you, you are the only man in whom I have ever hoped. Lately, I have wished you could do what I could not do, that you could become what I could not be. You have moments and seeds of genius, signs of differing deeply from the others. I have hoped in you, I still hope in you, though you do not want to understand either what I say or what I expect. For some time, you have been leading a life that displeases me. You do not read any more, you do

not work any more, you do not come to see me. You have become mixed up with a pack of idiots and what you write is cold, flabby stuff, fit for cafés and drawing-rooms. I no longer see you go into the country, but I know you run after women; I no longer meet you alone, but with men you should flee like the plague. You are no longer yourself; your ambition has fallen like broken wings; you care more about earning money than rousing fear; you seek to be comfortable rather than to soar. I have never told you these things so crudely before, but you may well listen to a dying man who loves you. And because of this, I have thought of making a last desperate attempt to save you. In any case, I must die the day after to-morrow, but I want you to know I am dying for you. You are too much attached to life and you have not the courage to kill yourself. After the backsliding of the last few months, if you thought again of what you have been and what you wanted to be, you would have to kill yourself, but I know you will not do it. I am going to take your place and take your sins too upon myself. I can no longer bear the painful sight of your self-forgetfulness and so I am going to do what you ought to do and dare not. I am going to kill myself in the

hope that my death will be such a shock to your soul that it will rise again and completely change its substance, to the day of your death. Nothing is obtained without sacrifice, without blood. I am going to sacrifice myself for you; I am going to shed my blood that you may be great. I too, like Christ when he was thirty-three years old, go freely to the last agony. He died to save all men; I, who am no God, die to save one. Let us hope that my sacrifice will not be as vain as his. It may be that I am mistaken and that you are already so bespattered with mediocrity that even the impression of my death cannot set you on your feet again and bring you back to your true self. But I want to hope to the very last. When you realize that a man whom you respect has killed himself in sorrow at seeing you fall so low and in the hope of giving you back to your true destiny, perhaps you will no longer smile as you are doing now. I am not joking. You will know within two days whether I have been playing the fool or whether I have really given you the greatest proof of love one man can give to another."

Up to that moment, I had not interrupted him once and I had listened to his long harangue without being able to avoid smiling senselessly

now and again. But I wanted to have my say too. I cannot forget my logic even in the most solemn moments.

"Excuse me," I said dryly, "but I have not quite grasped whether you are killing yourself because you have not succeeded in achieving anything yourself or because you want to make me achieve something. In the first case, I have no great reason to be moved or upset; in the second case, I will await the experiment, if you have been speaking seriously."

Had I but never said it! My friend, without even looking at me, jammed the cloth hat on his head, and left me abruptly, convulsively clutching the hand that was wrapped up in his handkerchief. I tried to follow him, but evening was falling and a light mist hung over the deserted avenues. The poor wretch was hurrying along desperately with the disjointed steps of a tired man. At a turn of the road, I lost sight of him and I could not make out where he had gone. What could I do?

The famous date has passed and I have never seen him again.

26

Four Hundred and Fifty-three Love-letters

IN the bottom drawer of my chest of drawers, locked away, there are four hundred and fifty-three letters from a woman. They are love-letters, addressed to me, all from the same woman, whom I loved many years ago, whom I no longer see, whose whereabouts I do not even know. There are four hundred and fifty-three love-letters; all that is left of a great passion.

This drawerful of letters worries me. I am not a sentimentalist; on the contrary, I am as cold as ice: more observant than passionate. I have made these letters — the ashes of a fire that is spent — a subject of study. Everything can serve as an object of scientific research. I want, in this way, to set myself free. If I destroyed them, they would always be there like a vain regret in my empty heart.

I started first by numbering them one by one. There are four hundred and fifty-three — neither more nor less — I am quite sure of that. I put them in chronological order: they date from 1903 to 1906. Then I tied them up in packets, month by month: January, 1903: four; February, 1903: eighteen; March, 1903: thirty-two and so forth. There are more and more of them; from then onwards, the packets grow larger every month. The largest is of June, 1904: fifty-seven letters. But in 1905, the packets grow smaller again until in October, 1906, there is a single letter, God grant *the last!*

I have weighed them too (since even the most spiritual and poetic of letters have their weight, according to the postal-clerks). I have weighed them carefully, a few at a time; altogether there are 212 ounces: more than 13 pounds. It is a respectable weight for a passion and if you had to carry it all in a sack at once, you would not journey far with it.

I have counted the pages too, one by one. The number of them is appalling; women have no idea how easily they write. For them, words, be they spoken or written, are not sacred coin, but cents which they can spend at any moment with truly Byronian prodigality. It is true that

this woman had a very large handwriting and left a great deal of space between the lines, but, notwithstanding that, it seems incredible that in only four hundred and fifty-three letters she should have been able to fill three thousand, two hundred and twenty pages. No letter has less than four pages, some have eight, some ten, some twelve and even sixteen. The account balances but I marvel greatly all the same. I think to myself that if she had had to write all those pages one after the other — those three thousand, two hundred and twenty pages — even if she had been able to write ten pages an hour, it would have taken her three hundred and twenty-two hours; that is to say thirteen days and thirteen nights on end, without stopping for a moment. I believe her love, great as it was, would not have been equal to such a test.

I have neither the time nor patience to count the words and syllables but my researches did not stop there. I have, for instance, observed, with a certain interest, that there are four types of paper and envelopes. Some of the letters are on hand-made paper, thick and heavy, the yellowish tint of old ivory; others are on parchment paper with long, narrow envelopes; still others on ugly white business paper, poor and

fibrous. But most of them are on thin foreign paper, in dark blue envelopes lined with grey and black patterns, so that one cannot read the words from the outside. I have not even forgotten the economic side of my epistolary hoard. All this paper has been manufactured, sold wholesale and then sold again retail. According to my calculations, which I believe to be fairly correct, since I too have tried various kinds of note-paper, I maintain that the whole cost of the paper must have amounted to about four dollars and some odd cents. That is by no means a negligible amount for someone who is not rich. You can buy a number of things for four dollars, without thinking of note-paper. For instance, at least five French novels at seventy-five cents each.

But the expense of the note-paper is the least of it. Every one of those letters has a stamp. Out of these four hundred and fifty-three letters, there are one hundred and twelve that come from distant towns and three hundred and forty-one that come from the same town in which I live. It is therefore a question of one hundred and twelve stamps at five cents, which is equal to five dollars and sixty cents, and three hundred and forty-one stamps at two cents,

which makes six dollars and eighty cents. Counting up everything together, paper and stamps, it will be seen that the expense incurred by this poor infatuated woman was about sixteen dollars and forty cents. But what about the ink? In order to write three thousand, two hundred and twenty pages, you need at least four bottles of ink. Let us put the cost of each bottle at twelve cents and the total cost amounts to almost seventeen dollars. I believe indeed that this passion, in terms of money, cost my correspondent little more than seventeen dollars and certainly less than eighteen. Its actual value is undoubtedly still less, almost nothing. Waste paper is not much in demand and there are people who will barely pay a cent a pound for it. So that out of this whole epistolary hoard, I should make no more than thirteen cents at the most. It is quite clear that it is not worth throwing away such a poetic record for so little.

And then there is *something more* — for the historian and the poet alike — in these letters than when they were just boxes of note-paper in the stationer's shop. There are all the words written on them, all the passion of three years, an enormous quantity of endearments, adjectives and kisses: there is in fact, to put it

shortly, a little of the innermost life of a man and a woman. And now, it is worth nothing.

I feel I am being absolutely idiotic with all these statistics and speculations. But I am made that way: I am not a sentimentalist; I am an observer of things. When I see a dead man, I think of all the money his relations must have spent on medicines that could not save him and when a mother weeps, I try to guess how many pints of tears she would weep in a whole day, including the night. What do you expect? I am made that way; I am not a sentimentalist.

And these four hundred and fifty-three love-letters, locked in the bottom drawer of my chest of drawers, worry me a little. I do not want to have them and I do not want to burn them. And I have done all I could to get them out of my mind. I have counted and reckoned everything, and yet, deep down in my heart, there is something that moans and sighs and will not be still. But I pay no attention to it; I am not a sentimentalist.

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